



TOWN OF HATE

Maxwell Grant

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- ? [I.](#)
- ? [II.](#)
- ? [III.](#)
- ? [IV.](#)
- ? [V.](#)
- ? [VI.](#)
- ? [VII.](#)
- ? [VIII.](#)
- ? [IX.](#)
- ? [X.](#)
- ? [XI.](#)
- ? [XII.](#)
- ? [XIII.](#)
- ? [XIV.](#)
- ? [XV.](#)
- ? [XVI.](#)
- ? [XVII.](#)
- ? [XVIII.](#)
- ? [XIX.](#)
- ? [XX.](#)

I.

Two houses stood on the hill.

Strange houses, those, because of their contrast. Individually, each had qualities that captured the admiration. Compared as a pair, they clashed.

The same was true of the owners.

Claude Bigby owned the old mansion and it reflected his conservatism. For a century the Bigby family had lived on the slope above the town of Lamira in the great stone residence which looked lost among its own gables. The original Bigbys had hewn the oak trees to form the clearing where the next generation had reared a mansion to replace the paternal log cabin. By then, the paper mill in the Kawagha Valley had become a source of large and steady income.

By the time the mill had thrived and died, the Bigbys had become huge land-owners. They developed acres of farms, orchards, quarries and other operations, until these had been parceled off to smaller investors. From then on, the family had conserved its wealth, which now belonged to Claude Bigby. He

had inherited tradition along with visible assets.

The Bigby tradition was founded on one invariable rule: What you can't use, sell to someone who can. The system had worked perfectly until Claude Bigby--present incumbent of the gabled mansion, sound of mind and body, in his forty-first year of wisdom--had sold the old family sheep pasture.

Of course it was more than an ordinary sheep pasture, and therefore it brought more than an ordinary price. This was the very reason Claude Bigby should have suspected what might happen to it. The pasture occupied the same slope as The Gables. It followed the side of the wooded hill that curved around to the left. The dividing line between the mansion grounds and the old pasture was Stony Run, the stream that cascaded down the hill to join the Kawagha River.

Perhaps the trouble was that Claude Bigby hadn't sold his sheep until he sold his pasture.

Sheep love to nibble a pasture clean, giving it the effect of a beautiful, well-kept lawn. That was what attracted Preston Brett. He was a man of Claude's age and wealth, but none of the tradition. Mr. Bigby should have guessed that Mr. Brett had no intention of raising sheep.

What Preston Brett raised was a residence of the most ultra-modern style. His new home was one of those prefabricated propositions, constructed out of everything from indestructible glass to unrecognizable plastics. It was all brought in sections like the parts of Solomon's Temple. The completed whole included impossible balconies and a flat-topped roof with garage accommodations for the post-war helicopter that Brett had ordered.

So now the broad slope had two mansions: Brett's dream-dwelling with its soap-bubble hues and strange name of "Future Haven", opposed to Bigby's ivy-walled establishment which was called "The Gables".

Which house was the monstrosity depended on the viewpoint. One thing was certain: whoever lived in one of those houses would normally view the other in contempt, house and all. Each being a normal man in his own right, Bigby and Brett behaved accordingly.

Those houses, however, were but the personalized symbols of the feud that had grown between the old and new.

The man who knew it all was Herbert Creswold. He was telling the full tale as he sat by the window of the fifth floor room of the Kawagha Hotel. His interested listener was a visitor named Ralph Lenstrom.

He was a shrewd man, Creswold, with sharp eye and grizzled hair that denoted experience to back his keen gaze. He had lived in Lamira long enough to learn its possibilities as well as its quirks.

"Look at this town." Creswold gave a gesture from the window. "Tell me what you see in it, Lenstrom."

Adjusting his glasses, Lenstrom raised his heavy eyebrows to offset the bags that lay beneath. His piggish face gave the impression that he would have liked to wallow in the grassy soil that flanked the sides of Lamira's main street. What Lenstrom was seeing, however, were buildings which were mostly of wood, except the Star Theater and the Lamira State Bank. Those two structures were brick.

"Rather antiquated," observed Lenstrom. "Or should I say obsolete?"

"Either term will do," conceded Creswold. "The point is they're doing business. Agreed?"

Lenstrom couldn't help but agree. It wasn't yet evening, but lines were forming in front of the Star Theater. That promised a capacity crowd for the supper show, at which the average theater would find the attendance poor. People were also going in and out of the bank, which stayed open until nine every

evening. As for the stores that lined the street, they were receiving their full quota of customers. Judging from the packages that people were bringing out, business was heavy.

"Yes, Lamira is a product of the past," observed Creswold, from Lenstrom's shoulder, "but that makes its future all the brighter. Picture that main street with fine stores, more and larger theaters, a huge hotel to replace this one--"

"It will get them," interrupted Lenstrom, "if Preston Brett has his way."

Creswold's answer was a chuckle. Lenstrom pointed out a sizeable modern mill. It was located where the main street crossed the narrow Kawagha over an old, clumsy bridge. The mill bore Brett's name and a horde of workers were coming from it. But that wasn't why Creswold laughed.

"You still think Brett is going to expand his industries, don't you?" queried Creswold. "That, just because he is making the mill pay, he will soon own the timber and the quarries hereabouts? I'm telling you, Lenstrom, that Brett has gone the limit--and more."

"How more?"

"Look over among those hills," suggested Creswold. "See those farms and orchards. The people who own them don't want industry to rule this town. They'll make sure it doesn't."

"If enough of them remain, they may," admitted Lenstrom, "but they seem to be thinning out already. Look at the ruins of those farmhouses that have burned in the last month."

There was a nod from Creswold as Lenstrom pointed out blackened patches among the farms. Then:

"Don't worry about those," remarked Creswold, cheerfully. "Claude Bigby will see that those farmers rebuild. They are his friends, you know. Maybe Brett thinks he owns the town, but Bigby claims the county and it includes the town."

As if by common consent, Creswold and Lenstrom looked off to the hill straight beyond the town. There, the two houses representing the old and new occupied the same slope, with Stony Run carving the quarter-mile stretch that divided the two properties.

From this distant observation post, the two buildings appeared quite close together, which made the comparison the more odious for both. It was plain, however, that Bigby and Brett kept themselves completely apart. There was no sign of a pathway between the houses. A journey by road would necessarily be roundabout, for the driveway up to Bigby's began soon after the highway crossed the river; whereas to reach Brett's, a car would have to follow the road around the base of the hill.

Creswold and Lenstrom were thinking in terms of men, not houses and the outlook was itself an expression of their thoughts. Looming over the hill, as though to engulf the buildings and their occupants, was a huge thunder cloud. It represented one of the frequent storms that struck the region. A sharp crackle of lightning etched the hillside scene; shortly there came a salvo of distant thunder.

"Sounds like Bigby arguing with Brett," laughed Creswold, "I'll bet those two could out-shout the biggest thunderstorm that ever struck Lamira."

"I've heard about those storms," said Lenstrom, nervously. "How big are they?"

"Plenty," assured Creswold. "We'd better stay indoors until this one passes. It will follow up the Kawagha past the Old Bridge Tavern. That's where they all go and it's where they hit the hardest. But let's get back to business."

"You mean Brett's business?"

"Or Bigby's." Creswold gave a canny smile. "They're both licked: Brett because he wants to rush everything and make it grow too fast; Bigby because he won't uproot himself and turn reasonably modern."

The sky was darkening rapidly and Lenstrom's face clouded with it. A flash of lightning revealed a troubled expression on the man's countenance. Creswold was prompt to understand it.

"I wouldn't invest in Brett's expansion schemes," advised Creswold. "He's already having trouble from the workers because he's been hiring outsiders. You've heard that, haven't you?"

Lenstrom gave a slow nod.

"It would be equally foolish to back Bigby if he wanted cash," added Creswold, glibly. "Those two are going to cancel each other out like a couple of Kilkenny cats."

"And then?"

"Then there will be some sense in Lamira. The farmers and the town-folk will get together and really run things right. The profit will be in local real estate and the enterprises that go with it. Now is the time to buy into the real investments, while everybody is watching Bigby and Brett--"

There was a double interruption from the storm and Lenstrom's telephone. The coincidence of a lightning flash and the jangle of the bell made the fat man hesitate. Smiling, Creswold picked up the telephone.

"I'll answer it," he said. "I've never had lightning shock me over the phone wires. Besides, the call is probably for me. I left word that I'd be here and I have a lot of friends in this county. In fact"-- Creswold was lifting the receiver-- "they call me everybody's friend."

The call was for Creswold and he had trouble making himself heard above the rumble of the thunder. Away from the window, where rain was pelting furiously, Lenstrom caught snatches of the conversation. At last Creswold said:

"Alright, I'll meet you there. Wait for me. I'm glad you have it fixed."

Turning toward Lenstrom, Creswold shrugged as he saw how heavily the storm was lashing at the window. He had the air of a man accepting a task whether or not he liked it.

"I'll see you later, Lenstrom," said Creswold. "Meanwhile hold everything. I may have more to tell you. One of my scouts has picked up a few new angles. There's a lot of them in this county--scouts and angles both."

Lightning and thunder, teamed in a terrific broadside, followed Creswold's hurried departure from the hotel room. Cringing beside the door, fearing to touch its metal knob, Lenstrom gave a fearful glance toward the window.

Outside, the downpour had obliterated the entire scene. Those houses on the far hill were gone--not only from Lenstrom's sight but from his mind as well. The fury of the cloudburst terrified the timid man with the piggish face. He didn't like the town of Lamira, when it stormed.

Ralph Lenstrom wasn't going to like Lamira even afterward.

II.

A LITTLE matter like a terrific thunderstorm might alarm the soft townsmen in Lamira--particularly newcomers like Preston Brett, the man who thought he owned the town. But it didn't bother the county crowd that patronized the Old Bridge Tavern. They were hill-folk, like Claude Bigby.

What if the storms did hurl their hardest bombardment through the narrow, sloping gorge; there, where the old bridge crossed the turbulent Kawagha as it tumbled toward the mill valley? These people were used to the river's roar. A rousing thunderstorm simply added to the accustomed tumult. Once in a while a passing storm splintered a towering pine tree and crashed it somewhere near the inn; when it did, the drinks were on the house.

It was just an old Kawagha custom, dating from the days when teamsters used to lash their horses to the limit so they could reach the tavern by the old bridge and find an excuse for sampling its liquid wares, with a chance for a free tripper. Ramshackle though the tavern was, it had stood the test of a century. Only one building in this region was older; the house where Claude Bigby lived.

There were Bigby portraits in the Old Bridge Tavern, beginning with the glowering old original who had felled Indians with his axe along with trees. He had been noted for saying--and proving--that an axe was just the same as a tomahawk, except that it had a longer reach. They had been hard men, these Bigbys, to others than their friends.

The last portrait in the line behind the tavern bar was a modern photograph. It was enlarged and chrome-tinted. It had the straight Bigby nose, the broad eyes and the square chin, proving that the Bigby line lost none of its determination in its present scion, Claude.

Old Clem Jolland, who ran the inn, had a habit of toasting Claude's picture in anticipation of his patron's occasional visit. At those times the drinks were on Mr. Bigby instead of the house. But since Bigby had a preference for riding out thunderstorms in his own residence, Clem was at present counting other faces. There was a chance that he might soon be pouring an obituary for some stricken pine tree.

"Nine of you," said Clem, dourly. "Which guy snuk in, hoping for a free? There was only eight, last time I counted. How about you, Zeke Stoyer?"

Clem shot the question at a stoop-shouldered man with a morbid, drawn face. With a shake of his head, Zeke planked a half-dollar on the bar.

"I was here afore," he argued. "Guess I was using the telephone last time you counted. Anyway, here's for a drink, out of my own money."

"Out of somebody else's money," sneered Clem, "Getting important, aren't you, using the telephone? Who were you calling? Maybe to Mr. Bigby, huh, to apologize for falling asleep without counting his sheep the last time you were tending them?"

"They found the sheep that got lost," returned Zeke. "Maybe I hain't worked for Mr. Bigby since, but it's only because he can't find nothing for me to do."

"He says different, Mr. Bigby does," confided Clem. "He says that if you ever ask him for another job, he'll horse-whip you over into the sheep pasture that this Brett guy has spoiled worse'n if he turned it over to cows. By the way"--Clem's eye went angry--"you've been going around to Brett's a lot lately, huh?"

"Only to deliver packages," returned Zeke, tapping an expressman's badge on his cap. "Same as I do to Bigby's house occasional. Same as I'm doing right now."

Zeke gestured to a square package lying on a chair near the bar. Eyeing it, Clem waited until approaching

thunder had followed a lightning flash. Then, the proprietor asked:

"A package for me?"

"Naw." Zeke shook his head. "Jest something I'm taking into Lamira. Didn't like to leave it laying in the open truck. Guess I'll ride it on the seat alongside me. S'long, Clem, and I hope two pines get busted."

Clem's jaw dropped as Zeke picked up the package and sauntered out through a rear exit. Never before had an eligible party walked out on a chance for a free drink at the Old Bridge Inn. Zeke's action amazed the regulars, too, until one tilted his head, listened between thunder claps, and laughed.

"Don't hear no backfire from Zeke's truck," the fellow said. "Likely he's just parking the package and coming back through the shed. He'll be waiting until a big tree goes and then coming in for his drink. You counted him, Clem."

The guess wasn't entirely wrong. Zeke was in the shed that the customer mentioned, but he hadn't made a return trip from his truck. In fact Zeke hadn't gone to the truck at all. As for the package, he didn't intend to deliver it. In the shed, Zeke had wedged an old chair under the door knob so that if anyone tried the door, it would stick. He was opening the package and getting it ready for business.

The contents of the package consisted chiefly of a square black box that Zeke handled very carefully. He poked it between two upright timbers of the main wall. He then uncoiled a long wire that was around the box and climbed a ladder until he reached the lean-to roof of the shed.

Right then, a vivid flash of lightning ripped. A few seconds later, the ensuing rumble of thunder sent reverberations up the gorge. The storm was getting very close, so close that the ladder shook under Zeke's knees. Though whether the thunder jarred it was a question. More likely the fault was Zeke's, for he was acting nervously.

Hurriedly, Zeke thrust a short metal rod through the roof of the shed, through a knot-hole that he had noted earlier. Scrambling down the ladder, he screwed a plug and cord into a hanging lamp socket. Like the rod and wire, these were attached to the black box. It immediately began to hum.

There was another flash of lightning and by the time the thunder came, Zeke was half way through the outer door. The storm was slowing. The low clouds met the narrow winding gorge, giving Zeke more time than he expected. Hopping back into the shed, he grabbed heaps of newspapers that were stacked in a corner. He skeltered them over the buzzing box. Grabbing a large kerosene can, Zeke poured its entire contents on the floor. He let the liquid trickle under the chair-barred door.

With the next thunder-clap, Zeke was through the outer door and gone into the first sweep of rain that lashed through the gorge. He couldn't have chosen a better moment for departure, because he merged with the downpour as though it had swallowed him. The sprawling inn was gone from sight by the time Zeke caught his breath and threw a hunted look across his bowed shoulder.

Zeke's truck wasn't parked in the one-time stable yard behind the inn, where it should have been. He had left it at a turnout in the road, a short distance toward town. There, the highway made a level hairpin turn, before taking the twisty slope down toward Lamira. Just before that grade stood the old bridge that crossed the Kawagha. It lead into a side road that traced an offshoot of the gorge, but Zeke wasn't concerned with those particulars.

Only the turnout was important and there was a reason why Zeke had chosen it. If Zeke had been parked in the old yard, he would have been forced to drive out the other direction and go clear around the inn, where the highway curved in plain sight of it. Zeke wanted to be as far away from the inn as

possible when something happened. He was therefore following a well-laid plan.

Loping along a path among the trees, Zeke was a hundred yards away when another flash of lightning came, with the thunder close upon it. Stopping short, Zeke huddled tensely. Relaxing, he laughed hoarsely and wiped the rain from his face as though mistaking it for a mass of perspiration.

Still ahead of his own game, Zeke had no cause for worry now. The lightning flash had shown him the short but steep embankment leading down between two brush-flanked trees. It sloped squarely to the road, where his truck was standing in the turnout on the other side. All Zeke had to do was clutch those two slender trees, let himself down carefully, and hop over to the truck.

He calculated on accomplishing it before another lightning flash. Though the embankment was already muddy, a slight slide wouldn't hurt.

In fact, the slide would have helped if Zeke had taken it, which he didn't.

As Zeke gripped the trees, the nearest bush stirred. The trees were at a slight angle and the bush was therefore perfectly placed for the next thing that happened. In the preternatural twilight, beneath the heavy storm cloud, a pair of heavily gloved hands took an angled grip upon Zeke's neck.

There was the strength of a vise in those clamping hands and the bulge in the gloves told why. The broad palms of the thick gloves contained strips of soldering metal that was pliable under pressure. Those two strips became the segments of a collar that included Zeke's windpipe. Nor could Zeke fight against them, for when he threw back his own hands to attempt a struggle, he lost his footing on the edge of the embankment. He could only claw madly to regain a hold upon the supporting trees.

Lightning zigzagged sharply and with its flash, Zeke writhed like the occupant of an electric chair. His backward lurch obscured the murderous foe who clutched him. As Zeke sagged forward, a roll of thunder boomed a ponderous knell. That writhe was Zeke's last; in the darkness, he became a different type of victim, a figure that seemed dangling from a hangman's noose.

The hands unclamped, the gloves spreading the improvised metal collar. Zeke's feet were on the embankment, so his fall was strictly a forward topple that didn't carry him far. His arms, twisted as crazily as the boughs of the gnarled trees, caught against the trunks and steadied him, thanks to the directing placement from the murderer's hands.

Only a slight jog was needed to pitch Zeke over the embankment brink, but in the blackness, the killer waited before delivering that final touch. In fact, all was so silent that the body of Zeke Stoyer seemed alone and forgotten.

Why had the murderer provided this strange sequel to his crime?

What could he be awaiting amid the soft whine of the wind that accompanied the patter of the drenching rain?

The answer came cutting through the singular mist that accompanies a thunder storm only when it drives itself into a pocket of rising land.

That answer was the smooth throb of an automobile motor. It purred above the muffled obbligato of the Kawagha River as it tumbled through its deep and rocky gulch!

III.

MARGO LANE shrieked and the brakes sang a tune that was a perfect mimic of her cry.

Only Lamont Cranston could have saved them from the thing ahead--so Margo thought; but she was prejudiced in Lamont's favor. What Cranston did wasn't really very remarkable; he was saving his best trick for a later demonstration.

What actually impressed Margo was the thing that could have happened if Lamont hadn't come through.

Their trim coupe was following the side road which was registered as 6-E on the road map. The "E" apparently stood for "endless." Amid a rain that Margo was mistaking for the Kawagha River, the road suddenly ended--with nothing but an inadequate chunk of fence between the car and nowhere. The fence was marked 6-E and in this case the "E" stood for "end."

The brakes weren't enough to halt a calamity that would have finished in the gorge. Unquestionably the fence meant that the road turned, but which way did it go? If Margo had been at the wheel, she'd have been thinking it over during the eighty-foot trip down into the gorge. Cranston didn't pause to ponder. He swung the wheel and answered the riddle.

The road went the way the car did, to the left.

Lightning ripped the rain and mist asunder, a split-second later. There was the road! And with it, the bridge that meant an immediate junction with the highway leading down to Lamira. The bridge was an old one and Margo expected to hear it rattle, but she didn't. Any clatter from those old timbers was completely drowned by the horrific blast of thunder that picked up where the lightning flash left off.

Margo caught her breath at the far end of the bridge. She grabbed Lamont's arm as he wheeled the car to the left. She'd been studying the road map so constantly that a basic idea remained wedged in her brain.

"Turn right!" shouted Margo, amid the dying thunder. "That's the way to Lamira!"

"We're stopping at the Old Bridge Tavern," returned Cranston, quietly, just as the thunderclap finished. "No need to ride out the storm. We'll let it do the job itself."

Its fog-lights cleaving the mist, the car made the swerve. Spotting the embankment, Cranston hugged the near-side of the hair-pin turn. The corner of his left eye was busy, though, just as it had been when he made the bridge. In an instantaneous glance, Cranston spied a turnout over on the gorge side. He was not deceived into considering it a part of the highway proper.

Perhaps his glimpse of a parked truck helped, but it also registered another impression; namely that the truck might have a driver. When Margo shrieked from her side of the car, Cranston knew the reason. In a flash, he spotted the missing driver who came plunging headlong from a high, steep embankment. He was apparently in a hurry to reach his truck.

There couldn't have been fifteen feet to go. A direct hit on that flying figure could have been admitted and accepted at any inquest. But Cranston missed, and that was when Margo learned what real skill at the wheel could do.

The car tipped to an angle that would have dropped Margo in Cranston's lap if the wheel hadn't intervened. The right side was up on the embankment like a racing car in a motordrome. The man who should have been a victim was sprawling in the exact center of a practically unoccupied highway.

Letting the embankment veer away from him, Cranston leveled off and stopped the car.

Lightning flickered, thunder crashed, and what Margo might have said, she didn't, because she couldn't.

This was one of those things that called for a long halt and lots of quiet, but Cranston wasn't thinking in such terms. His uncanny judgment was just becoming tuned, for very suddenly he flung the car door open and leaped out to the road. Thinking the highway was going to cave completely, Margo sprang from her side of the car; then better judgment told her that Lamont was simply going back to help the near-victim to his feet.

Again, Margo's guess was wrong. As she saw Cranston dash past the prone figure, Margo heard the sudden thrum of a motor, coming from the direction of Lamira. Margo knew that the approaching car must be very close, as everything else had been, so far. In fact, to her astonished ears, the sound seemed to start very sharply. However, the car was coming faster than might be expected, which meant that its driver must be someone who knew this road.

Cranston was moving fast, too, but in the other direction. Margo caught a distorted glimpse of him against a pair of headlights and her deductions ended in a gasp. It wasn't her fear that Cranston might be run down; somehow, she couldn't connect common accidents with Lamont. What Margo saw reminded her of a memory which projected itself into the future.

Against the glare, Cranston's figure looked fantastically like a shrouded shape clad in a flowing cloak and slouch hat. He was in that instance another personage entirely, a strange, amazing being known as The Shadow.

The illusion was quickly gone, however, obliterated by rain and mist. The oncoming car came to a stop well short of the inert shape that was lying in the highway. Margo hurried in that direction. She was just in time to form a huddle with Cranston and a man who was getting out of the car.

They were all in the shine of the headlights. One look at the man from the car was all that Margo needed not to like him. His eyes were shrewd. They became accusing, like his crisp, tight smile, which, though devoid of humor, had no justification in the present situation. Removing his gloves and folding them in his pocket, the man asked coolly:

"How hard did you hit him?"

Cranston simply gestured to the embankment and an obliging lightning flash enlarged the feeble scope of the headlights to clearly show the tire tracks of Cranston's car. No statement was needed; none could have helped, considering that the thunder was roaring all around as though the lightning had flashed from almost overhead.

The man nodded until the peal had faded; then introduced himself as he stooped beside the body.

"My name is Herbert Creswold," he introduced. "I just drove up from Lamira. I know this fellow; his name is Zeke Stoyer." Creswold came erect, rubbed his hands and added: "He's dead."

Margo looked toward the embankment; it seemed to loom tremendously in the steaming rain. She could picture a broken neck as one of several logical ailments after a tumble from such a height.

"Zeke was probably in the Old Bridge Tavern," continued Creswold, "along with the other bar-flies who would do anything for a drink. He was probably fool enough to come back to his truck for something, before he went to collect."

Cranston's eyebrows lifted.

"Collect what?"

"His free drink," explained Creswold. "They hand one out every time the lightning cracks a tree. Judging

from the last flash, the next will be the pay-off if there is one."

There was a splitting smash from somewhere among the trees above the embankment. The concussion seemed so close that Margo thought she felt its scorch. The air cleared itself and spread the peculiar odor of ozone, as if nature had provided a bracer as compensation for the nervous shock of its misdeed.

"Whatever tree that hit," began Creswold, "it was certainly the biggest--"

Cranston's gesture interrupted. He was indicating a flare that lifted above the trees. Wild ideas regarding spontaneous combustion swept through Margo's mind as she saw that the vivid glare was produced by a rising flame. Creswold knew this locality and it was he who voiced the answer:

"The Old Bridge Tavern!"

It was Creswold who pointed out the driveway into the old stable-yard. There, Cranston halted the car. Lightning was crackling from the upper reaches of the gorge. Thunder was rolling back its heavy, but no longer fearful, tone. But the lightning flash was pale compared to the holocaust that greeted the arrivals.

The Old Bridge Tavern was finished. The flames were spreading right and left from a sizeable shed that was already an inferno. A group of staggering men were rounding the corner of the disappearing inn. They were giving the massive bonfire a wide berth as they stared at the display in total disbelief.

Behind them came old Clem Jolland, carrying a bottle. He overtook the dazed men as they formed a crude circle, clutching their glasses in their hands. With a slow, steady nod, Clem counted the faces. His own brightened as he completed the tally.

"All except Zeke," announced Clem. "I was right when I said he wasn't hiding in the shed. He was just acting smart, figuring no pine tree was going to get hit. Well, Zeke was right, for oncet--only he was wrong, too."

Steadying his hand, the old innkeeper made the rounds of the glasses and poured his customers the contents of the bottle. Finding that he had a last inch for himself, Clem delivered a wise smile and declared:

"Here's drinks on the house-- what's left of it!"

There wasn't anything left, in the way of drinks or house. The last rafters of the old tavern were falling into a fiery pit as Clem swallowed the final drops from his bottle. It was singular how rapidly that fire had spread and completed its annihilating work.

Lamont Cranston had a word for it which he spoke in an undertone that only Margo Lane was close enough to hear.

That word was: "Thermite."

IV.

THE coroner's inquest was over. Its verdict was death through misadventure. In local parlance, this was interpreted to mean that Zeke Stoyer had gone and busted his fool neck.

Of less importance, legally, was the destruction of the Old Bridge Inn. Indeed, that incident was taken entirely for granted. The old tavern had "gotten it" after all these years. The law of averages had simply caught up with it.

Even old Clem Jolland was reconciled to that opinion. Having lived in the inn for half its hundred years, and weathering previous storms along with the tavern, Clem was the man who certainly should know.

Lamont Cranston was present at the inquest with Margo Lane. Studying the corners of the courtroom, Cranston observed Herbert Creswold. He was bent in earnest conversation with a pudgy-faced man whom Cranston had seen around the local hotel. Cranston knew the man's name and why he was in town.

"Ralph Lenstrom," Cranston undertoned to Margo. "They say he has fifty thousand dollars that he's willing to invest in a new industry planned by Preston Brett."

Margo's eyes went surprised.

"Does Brett need money?"

"And badly," defined Cranston. "Why do you think I came to Lamira?"

"Why--why--" Margo caught herself and reduced her tone to a whisper. "I thought you intended to look into mysterious happenings here, such as riots at the mill and unaccountable fires that have ruined so many farm-houses."

"So I do," acknowledged Cranston. The coroner's gavel rapped a conclusion to the inquest. "That's why I'm posing as a big investor. It will enable me to talk frankly with a man who may know what's in back of everything."

"You mean Brett of course."

"Yes, but he isn't here." Cranston paused at the doorway and watched Creswold go out with Lenstrom. "Maybe Brett wants to avoid arguments, but he's losing business meanwhile."

"Business with Lenstrom?"

"That's right. Apparently our friend Creswold is selling Lenstrom a bill of goods."

"Maybe you ought to find Brett," suggested Margo with a naive smile, "so that you could tell him."

"I'll find Brett soon enough," returned Cranston, "or rather, he'll find me. I think it would be better to appraise Brett first, from the standpoint of the opposite camp."

Margo followed Cranston's gaze and saw exactly what he meant. A tall, dominating man with straight nose, broad forehead and wide chin was coming from the inquest. A cluster of men surrounded him. His status in the county had been determined at the moment of his arrival. Immediately, the coroner had invited him to sit as advisor in proceedings. The man was Claude Bigby, around whose family this county literally had grown.

Getting in a word with Bigby was almost impossible at present. That fact was to Cranston's advantage, for he saw a man who was highly anxious to talk to Bigby, but couldn't; namely, Clem Jolland. So Cranston stepped over and clapped Clem on the back in a style so friendly that a smile came to the innkeeper's worried face.

"Anything I can do for you, Clem?"

"I wish there was, Mr. Cranston," replied Clem, ruefully. "If you only knowed Mr. Bigby right well, you could speak to him for me."

"Why not speak to Bigby yourself?"

"I would, if he warn't so busy. He'll be going up to his house with that farmer's committee. They're grange folk mostly and I don't belong."

"I think you do, Clem," decided Cranston. "Since you don't have a car, suppose we drive you up there."

By then Bigby was in his car and was starting away, along with others. Old Clem looked highly pleased, particularly when he reached Cranston's car and saw its de luxe quality. Apparently Clem judged this as the sort of car that would impress the county's most important citizen. Clem was wrong.

As a long and trusted native of the Kawagha Region, Clem Jolland was personally the proper passport to Bigby's hillside domain, as events soon proved.

Approaching The Gables along the driveway that began on the far side of the Kawagha, Cranston encountered challengers. Some of Bigby's farmer friends clambered from their cars and hurried to flag the smooth coupe. There was ire in the faces that looked in from Cranston's window. A voice gruffed:

"What are you doing here? We don't want no friends of Preston Brett around these premises."

Cranston gestured nonchalantly across Margo to Clem, who was seated on the other side.

"I'm bringing Clem Jolland," said Cranston. "He wants to see Claude Bigby."

That made a difference. The coupe was waved right through to the gabled porte-cochere that fronted Bigby's house. With old Clem looking proud and happy, Cranston and Margo were ushered into a finely furnished living room. Bigby received them with a friendly handshake.

It was immediately evident that Claude Bigby knew everything that happened in the county and took it all to heart. He accepted Cranston without question because the stranger had given precise testimony regarding the curious death of Zeke Stoyer. As for Clem, Bigby recognized his troubles before the old tavern-keeper could declare them.

"You're worried about your insurance," said Bigby to Clem. "Twenty-five thousand dollars' valuation, wasn't it, Clem?"

"Yes, sir," replied Clem. "I was thinking, though, that some folks might have considered it kind of high--"

"Nonsense," interrupted Bigby.

"Your furniture consisted of antiques, didn't it?"

"It was old stuff if that's what you mean. Nigh onto as old as the inn, maybe older, some of it."

"Some of the finest hand-made furniture of this region," said Bigby, turning to Cranston and Margo. "Better than many of the items in my own collection."

With a wide sweep of his hand, Bigby indicated the contents of his living room. Margo found herself lost in admiration. Chairs, tables, and sideboards were all of the sort that would produce eager looks at New York auctions. If Bigby's lost belongings resembled these, the appraisal of the inn's furnishings was low.

"T'warn't fancy, my furniture wasn't," said Clem, "but it was as old as yours, Mr. Bigby. Guess you're more fitten' to judge than I am."

"And don't forget the portraits," added Bigby, with a sad shake of his head. "My whole family line was

represented at the Old Bridge Tavern. I always wanted to buy them from you. Remember, Clem?"

"Only I warn't selling for no price," nodded Clem. "They were like old friends, them pictures. I'd have given 'em to you though, Mr. Bigby, if ever I'd sold the inn."

"And I would have given you five thousand dollars for them," declared Bigby. "That was the value an art expert placed on them, the time I brought him up to the tavern. No, Clem, don't worry about your insurance. The County Mutual will pay the claim in full."

"I'm wondering if it can, Mr. Bigby."

As Clem made that statement, Bigby's manner showed its first change. The broad eyes hardened and spread their stern influence across the rugged face. It was like an aftermath of the furious clouds that had stormed this region the day before. Bigby seemed to be gathering himself to forge a verbal thunderbolt and hurl it upon the man who doubted him.

Cranston didn't miss that change on Bigby's part, but Margo did. She was looking from the living room window across to Brett's polychrome mansion. The modern home was beginning to blend with a lovely sunset from beyond the hill. Fortunately for old Clem, he had witnessed Bigby's heavy moods before. He was able to divert this one.

"Don't misunderstand me, Mr. Bigby." Clem's tone was rapid in its apology. "I ain't doubting that the County Mutual has plenty of funds. I'm only thinking that mebbe it wouldn't be fair to assess the members too heavy, on my account. Not after all the fires they've been paying for lately."

As Bigby's manner gradually eased, Cranston's enlightenment grew. He expressed it casually when he saw that Bigby had reached a reasonable state.

"This County Mutual," remarked Cranston. "Do I understand that it is one of those old-fashioned companies in which all members stand the cost of fires after they occur?"

Bigby nodded dourly.

"That's right," he said. "Of course there are moderate dues that go toward a sinking fund--"

"Which is liable to be sunk," interrupted Clem, "if you don't mind my saying so, Mr. Bigby."

"But the burden is becoming severe," continued Bigby. "It is time these mysterious fires were halted. Your case, Clem"--he swung suddenly to the inn-keeper--"may be the turning point. Tell me, where did that lightning strike the tavern?"

"Right smack on the shed," returned Clem. "Kind of freakish, I'd reckon, considering how low the shed was. Besides, there's some right big pines out back that ought to have taken it first."

Turning to Cranston, Bigby asked:

"Did you see the bolt strike?"

"I saw it pass the trees that Clem mentions," replied Cranston. "It appeared to stab down among them."

"How soon did the flames rise from the inn?"

"Almost immediately."

"Two freaks," commented Bigby. "Do you think that anything could have attracted that lightning stroke?"

Anything special, I mean?"

"It would have been possible," decided Cranston. "I have heard of devices that will attract lightning."

"And do you know of anything that could produce an immediate conflagration of the size you witnessed?"

"Yes, thermite could have done it."

Cranston's statement brought a head-shake from Clem.

"Hain't had no trouble from termites for the last ten years," began Clem. "I've heered of rats starting fires, but never termites--"

"Mr. Cranston is speaking of a high-powered chemical," interposed Bigby, "not of destructive insects. His conclusions fit precisely with my own. That is why we are all going to talk to the one man who can answer these very relevant questions."

In dominating fashion, Bigby waved his visitors out through the door. He escorted them straight to the driveway, where he gestured them into a large car. As he took the wheel, Bigby turned to the rear seat and added a piece of information that was scarcely necessary.

"By 'the one man'," announced Claude Bigby, "I mean Lamira's newest and most obnoxious citizen, Preston Brett!"

V.

WHEN he reached the bottom of his long, winding driveway, Bigby didn't turn to the right to follow the curving roundabout highway that led to Brett's gingerbread mansion. Instead, he turned to the left and followed the road into Lamira. There, he pulled up in front of new mill that Brett operated.

The workers who were coming from the mill stood stock-still as they saw Bigby alight from the arriving car. Of all visitors to these preserves, Bigby was the last they expected, because of his feud with Brett. By the rule of things, the mill hands should have been antagonistic toward Bigby--but they weren't.

While some remained fixed in surprise, others waved a cheery greeting. This developed into handclaps as Bigby strode in through the doorway marked "Office." Margo was puzzled, but Cranston saw the answer. Among the mill workers were several who didn't recognize Bigby at all; they were new hirelings imported by Brett. The local men, even though glad that industry was coming back to Lamira, did not relish such outlanders. Bigby, the man whose motto was "Kawagha for Kawaghans," was undoubtedly rising in favor.

At the head of a stairway, Bigby shoved open a door marked "Private" and met Brett face to face. As the others entered, they saw Brett rising to meet the man he didn't expect. There were several persons in the room, but there was no mistaking Preston Brett. He not only occupied the chair behind the big desk; his manner at seeing Bigby identified him fully.

There was a chunky hardness about Preston Brett that reminded one of rock. He appeared to be constructed of building blocks in assorted sizes, from his broad shoulders to thick neck and chiseled profile. His face was as wide as it was high and his eyes had a stony stare that his lips imitated as well as they could. Firming tightly they actually held back words that Brett was inclined to utter, but decided to withhold until Bigby, the intruder, committed himself.

"I'm here to ask you a question, Brett," snapped Bigby. "Where were you at the time of the storm

yesterday afternoon?"

Brett didn't answer, which simply stimulated Bigby to further outburst.

"You didn't happen to be near the Old Bridge Tavern, did you?" demanded Bigby. "They tell me that a car came racing down from that direction during the storm."

Eyes stonier than ever, Brett retained his calm.

"If you're thinking up an alibi," scoffed Bigby, "let's hear it, Brett."

Turning stiffly, Brett made a jerky gesture of his arm toward the men who were seated in the private office.

"These are the mill directors," introduced Brett. "They can tell you where I was."

Voices chimed in answer. To a man they declared that Brett had been at home, having left the mill early. He had expected to hold this meeting yesterday, but had called it off. Thinking Brett wanted to see them at the house, most of these men had gone there.

"They came flying out of the storm like snow-birds," completed Brett, with a short laugh. "I couldn't have gone up to the old bridge and come home in time to receive them, at least not by car. Of course"--his eye gave a hard twinkle--"I could have flown by helicopter, dropped an artificial thunderbolt on the tavern and hopped home, if that's what you're driving at, Bigby."

"But my new aerocar hasn't been delivered yet and you're welcome to inspect my roof hangar if you don't believe me. No, Bigby"--Brett shrugged his shoulders with a peculiar lift--"you're barking your shins on the wrong tree. Better luck next time."

His eyes turning slightly, Brett fixed them on Cranston. After a moment of consideration, the blocky man came from behind his desk with outstretched hand. During the handshake, Brett clapped Cranston heavily upon the shoulder. He introduced him to the directors.

"I told you we would find new investors," declared Brett. "I am having Ralph Lenstrom up to the house for dinner and I'm sure this gentleman will join us. His name is Lamont Cranston; he may remember having met me in New York."

"Of course you are welcome too, Bigby"--Brett turned to his arch rival-- "and I think you would enjoy the visit. For instance, you might learn the thing you have been trying to find out; how thoroughly I plan to expand the local industries with the aid of new capital."

Bigby shook his head, controlling his anger at Brett's sarcasm.

"Sorry, Brett," said Bigby, "but my niece is holding a party at the house this evening. I'm sure Miss Lane will be glad to be there, even though Mr. Cranston may consider your business more essential."

It was neat, that way of Bigby's. He was literally shunting Cranston into Brett's hands, yet retaining a hold through Margo. Very obviously, Bigby could manage to see Cranston later and perhaps gain an inkling of what had happened at Brett's. But that didn't bother Brett in the least. He kept his lips straight, which was his method of smiling.

In his turn, Cranston took prompt advantage of the situation; he said that he would stop at the hotel and get his brief case. Brett could pick him up there later. That permitted Cranston to bow out with Bigby and Margo, which pleased Bigby immensely. Getting into the car, they drove over to the hotel. On the

way, Bigby placed a few preliminary hints.

"Whatever Brett's business," declared Bigby, "I recognize your right to hold it in confidence, Cranston. Of course I would advise you to think more than twice before putting money into any of his projects--and you can tell Brett that I said so, if you wish.

"Matters are too unsettled in this county for anyone to be certain of the future. Of course"--Bigby's eyes gave a wise side-glance--"there is plenty of established wealth in plain sight, in the form of orchards, farmland, quarries and natural resources. Brett will have to consider the people who own those resources, before spreading his schemes too far."

They stopped at the hotel where Margo went to her room to put on a dinner dress. Coming down to the lobby, she found Cranston waiting there. He nudged toward the door, indicating that Bigby was waiting in the car outside. He mentioned that he had arranged for Margo to drive over to Brett's in the coupe after the party ended.

"Of course," said Margo. "Then I can bring you back to town, Lamont. Is that the idea?"

"It is," replied Cranston. Then, in an undertone: "Now that Brett has shown something of an alibi, keep tabs on anything you hear at Bigby's."

"About Brett, you mean."

"To a degree, but chiefly about Zeke Stoyer. They may begin to blame him for the job at the Old Bridge Tavern."

"Why, of course!" Margo subdued her exclamation at Cranston's quick gesture. "That would cover the case, wouldn't it?"

"Not quite," replied Cranston, "because it doesn't explain what happened to Zeke afterward."

"Why, we saw what happened--"

"You mean we saw Zeke break his neck? No, Margo, we didn't."

"But he plunged down the embankment head-first!"

"Body first, Margo, with his head tilted back and wobbling before he struck. That neck of Zeke's was a preliminary souvenir."

Margo's eyes showed horror at this suggestion of murder. She began to picture Zeke as a witness of incendiary preparations at the tavern. Gradually she caught Cranston's viewpoint: Zeke was a logical tool, disposed of by someone who had bribed him to plant the suspected fireworks.

A name was springing to Margo's mind when she saw the reason for Cranston's hushed tone. It involved the man in question. Over at the other side of the lobby, Herbert Creswold was engaged in earnest conversation with Ralph Lenstrom. The latter, for some reason, seemed both uneasy and unconvinced.

"It could have been Creswold," whispered Margo. "He might have propped Zeke's body so it would fall, and then gone to get his car, down on some side road below the bridge--"

Margo paused, studying Cranston's face as she always did when she went too far with her deductions. As usual, Margo saw a slight smile.

"I get it," added Margo. "Brett might have done the same and driven all the way home, before the

directors arrived there. Until you've settled the time element, the score stands even, doesn't it?"

"Unless other evidence crops up," replied Cranston, with a nod. "But don't bother yourself with those details, Margo. Just keep track of what goes on at Bigby's while I do the same at Brett's."

Something was going on right here in the lobby of the Kawagha Hotel. Lenstrom was shaking himself loose from Creswold and having a deal of trouble doing it.

"I'm sorry," Lenstrom was saying, "but I've got to stop at the bank before I meet Brett--"

"You mean that's where Brett is going to meet you," objected Creswold, testily. "Now listen, Lenstrom: I've told you--"

"I know what you've told me and I'll remember it. I'm no fool, Creswold. Why don't you come to Brett's yourself?"

"Because I haven't been invited and besides, my car is being repaired. Anyway, the man to see is Bigby. He knows this county better than Brett does. If you make that deal with Brett, you'll regret it."

Creswold finished his advice with a sharp turn on his heel and a stride across the lobby. Hesitating a few moments, Lenstrom finally went out through the front door. He turned in the direction of the bank. A sharp toot from an automobile horn made Margo think it was meant for Lenstrom until Cranston smilingly gestured her out to the street.

"Don't keep Bigby waiting," said Cranston. "I'll stay here until Brett picks up Lenstrom and comes back for me. Stay alert this evening, Margo, and let me know all that happens."

Much was to happen that evening, under Cranston's surveillance as well as Margo's; much more than either of them supposed!

VI.

MOONLIGHT lay upon the slope. Beneath its glow, Stony Run became a spattering ribbon with a sheen of silver. Rocks formed black splotches in the tumbling stream that divided Bigby's domain from Brett's. Among them was a conspicuous landmark.

This was Pow-wow Boulder, which divided Stony Run half-way down the slope. It was so called because the little islet which it dominated had been a gathering place for Indian chieftains prior to the arrival of the pioneers. In fact, Pow-wow Boulder had been the jumping off place for Indian attacks upon the original Bigby homestead. Hence, in a way, it belonged to the family tradition.

If Indians had still been around, they could also have used the Boulder as a starting point for a raid on Brett's. The big stone lay midway between the two mansions. Since there were no longer any Indians, the famous Boulder had simply become an object of dispute between Bigby and Brett, regarding whose property it occupied.

Tonight the Boulder was a forgotten subject. In The Gables, the light from many windows was creeping out beneath the overhanging eaves. On the other side of the Run, Future Haven showed an iridescent glow through its solid but translucent walls. The two parties were in progress.

The difference lay in the parties. There was merriment at Bigby's. A crowd of young folks completed the intricacies of the Boston Fancy and a variety of Square Dances. Farmers and their wives looked on in what seemed grim approval at this revival of the good old days. In the darkness around the antiquated mansion, the driveway was packed with old cars that looked like things from the fossil age.

Only Margo Lane sensed something somber in these proceedings. She noted that at intervals, Bigby and a few farmers drifted from the huge living room, in the fashion of men who planned to test the contents of a cider jug. The curious thing was that only Bigby returned. So when the master of the mansion coaxed away another pair of farmers, Margo decided to learn what it was all about.

Through a narrow, odd-shaped hallway, Margo reached a door where she could peer into an ample kitchen. She was right about the cider jug; several farmers were seated around a deal table, squeezing the last drinks from a diminished supply. Bigby wasn't with them. As Margo watched, three of the farmers finished their drinks and went out by the back door, advising the others to wait and learn the rest from Bigby.

So Margo waited too, outside her door. She learned some facts immediately. The farmers were discussing an important subject that had been mentioned that very afternoon.

"Twenty-five thousand more is going out," declared a farmer, adding figures on the oil-cloth. "It's going to tax us heavy, paying old Clem's claim."

"We've been taxed heavy already," returned another. "Where the money is coming from for this assessment is something I don't know."

"Brett has been offering to pay us some, in hard cash, too. Says he's willing to go easy on the interest payments."

"So I've heard, and I've got half a mind to go over to Brett's tonight. Only 'twouldn't be fair without telling Bigby first."

The sound of muffled footsteps sent Margo into a scurry around the turn of the hall. The footsteps were coming up some stairs from the cellar. Margo was scarcely out of sight before a door opened opposite the kitchen. Bigby appeared, carrying a cider jug. As she drew further back, Margo noticed that there was an outside door just behind her. It was bolted. Otherwise she could have used it to duck out into the dark, had Bigby turned in her direction. Fortunately however, Bigby didn't come toward the side door; he went across into the kitchen with the cider. Margo stole after him to watch the proceedings.

While he poured the cider, Bigby listened to a repetition of the comments that Margo had heard. He gave his conclusions in a firm, terse style.

"It's not just a question of raising money," asserted Bigby. "It's a matter of preventing fires."

To a man, the farmers agreed that Bigby was right.

"So why worry about seeing Brett?" demanded Bigby. "The proposition is to watch him."

That plan brought immediate ejaculations from the farmers. Certifying their approval with gulps of cider, they leaned their elbows on the deal table to hear more.

"I've sent the others out to watch him," explained Bigby, "and I'm expecting you to help them. Just see to it that Brett don't leave his house tonight and there won't be another bonfire with a farm-house in the middle of it."

While Bigby was steering the farmers out through the back door, Margo returned to the living room. She had joined one of the dances when Bigby arrived and began clapping hands in time to the music of the hayseed orchestra.

Over at Brett's fanciful mansion, the only music came from a low-tuned radio. Brett's associates were

seated around a modernistic table of black and chrome, spreading blueprints that covered prospective saw-mills, factories, quarry projects and even mines.

Their beverage happened to be champagne. Brett had gone down to his wine-cellar to select a few choice bottles. At least such was his stated reason, but Cranston could easily picture a better one. During Brett's absence, his stooges were talking frankly about his schemes. They were carefully turning all the trend in Brett's favor. This was for the special benefit of Lenstrom as an immediate investor, with a possible thought of Cranston as a future one.

When Brett returned with the champagne he gave an affable smile and inquired:

"Well, Lenstrom, what do you think of it?"

"I'd say you intend to tear the Kawagha region apart," observed Lenstrom, "if you ever get your hands on it."

"Or somebody else's hands," smiled Brett. "You brought the cash, didn't you, Lenstrom?"

"Fifty thousand dollars." Lenstrom produced a wad of bills and began counting it on the table. "I liked your proposal, that I should buy options on local land, rather than invest in your projects. It puts me in an excellent position."

"Right in the saddle," assured Brett. "I can buy the land from you when I expand. Meanwhile you have the land itself as security."

"There is only one trouble," said Lenstrom, looking around. "I don't see any customers."

"You mean the farmers?" Brett's tone was troubled. "Several of them promised they'd stop in, Lenstrom. I suppose that shindig at Bigby's detained them."

Shaking his head, Lenstrom gathered up the cash.

"Bigby didn't just detain them," he remarked. "He dissuaded them, as Creswold said he would."

"So you've been listening to Creswold." Brett's tone hardened. "He's the one man who doesn't count at all. I tell you, Lenstrom, these farmers need money because of the hard luck they've been having lately. They won't sell their land to me, because they've promised Bigby they won't. But I felt sure they would compromise far enough to give you options on their property. It's too good an opportunity to lose."

Looking at the clock, Lenstrom arose and put the money back in his pocket.

"I'm still interested," he declared, "but I think I'd better contact the farmers direct. Maybe they don't trust you, Brett."

"Perhaps not," admitted Brett. "I tell you what I'll do, Lenstrom. I'll prepare a list of names right now. I'll phone you at the hotel so you can start contacting them the first thing in the morning. These farmers get up early, you know."

Brett turned to the hallway that led to his study. Pausing, he offered:

"If you want me to keep the money, Lenstrom, I'll put it in my safe."

"They have one at the hotel," reminded Lenstrom. "Maybe I'd better carry the cash in case I meet any farmers who want to talk business."

"I hope you don't meet Bigby," said Brett. "He's money hungry and could use that cash himself. Maybe you'd better have my chauffeur drive you down to Lamira."

The chauffeur was at that moment bringing in a plate of sandwiches, since he acted as house man in his spare time. Lenstrom obligingly declined both a companion and refreshments as he reminded:

"Your chauffeur brought my car up here for me, remember, Brett? That was so I could leave when I wanted. I have an appointment at the hotel and I can't afford to be late. Good-night, everybody."

As Lenstrom left, Brett shrugged as though he had expected such a departure. Turning abruptly, Brett went into the study to prepare the list of names. It was, at least, good policy toward continuing negotiations with Lenstrom. The chauffeur began to dish the sandwiches among the blue-prints which were engrossing Brett's associates. Hence, no one noticed that someone beside Lenstrom had left.

Gone through another of the multitudinous doors that featured this experiment in future architecture, Lamont Cranston stopped long enough to unzip a special compartment hidden in the bottom of his brief case. From a space that formed an inverted V between two compartments stacked with papers, he was removing his favorite regalia: a slouch hat, a black cloak, and a pair of .45 automatics which were placed at the ends of the hidden interior to give it balance.

Up a short flight of stairs. Cranston had packed away the guns and was sliding his arms into the cloak before he reached the top. Planting the slouch hat on his head, he unlocked a window leading to a curious balcony. He stepped out. Lenstrom's car was just pulling away. Cranston dropped to the ground in his other personality of The Shadow.

A few swift strides and the cloaked figure could have reached the departing car. But The Shadow did not take those strides. A flood of flashlights suddenly converged upon him! With that glare came a semicircle of men, armed with pitchforks and shot-guns.

These were Bigby's farmer friends whose actions had been observed but not reported by Margo Lane. On hand to see that Preston Brett remained where he belonged, they had mistaken The Shadow for the man they wanted.

VII.

WHEN The Shadow played hunches, he played them to the full. His present hunch was that trouble awaited Ralph Lenstrom. The man was riding around with fifty thousand dollars in cash. Having run into a violent problem of his own, The Shadow clung to his original premise.

Trouble for anyone might well mean trouble for Lenstrom, who therefore remained the chief issue.

Pitchforks, shot-guns, and flashlights were all trouble-makers, but the foremost were the pitchforks. Their prongs were extended toward The Shadow, ringing him against the wall. Being the nearest menace, The Shadow disposed of them first. From his cloak he whipped a brace of automatics. He brandished these in the faces of the pitchfork gentry, who gave the proper response.

Recoiling from the threat of the automatics, those foremost farmers left The Shadow to the shot-gun crew. These surged forward, promptly poking their weapons in between the gaps in the receding front rank. By then, however, The Shadow was a jump ahead in more ways than one.

In flourishing his automatics, The Shadow cloaked them all in the same move. He lunged forward as the farmers drew back. His dark form came under the pitchforks as their owners unconsciously lifted them. His fists clamped upon the handles of the nearest pair. Slashing the pitchforks upward, The Shadow

twisted them from the farmer's hands. The men dodged wildly to escape the prongs. The Shadow swung the implements in a wide-armed motion that cleared the remainder of the circle.

Shot-gunners dodged as flashlights flew aside, leaving a broad space through which The Shadow flung himself into darkness. By the time the men with the shot-guns rallied, yelling for their comrades to lay low, The Shadow was gone.

So was Lenstrom's car.

That was the unfortunate part. This delay had proven costly to The Shadow's simple plan; namely to convey Lenstrom and his cash back to Lamira. There wasn't a chance to overtake Lenstrom. His car was a hundred yards down Brett's winding driveway. But it would be possible to intercept him, somewhere along the road that came back around the base of the hill.

Therefore, The Shadow took to the sort of shelter that would speed him on his way. Flinging away the pitch-forks, he cut around the front corner of Brett's fancy mansion. Shotguns roared a furious but futile blast somewhere behind him. The Shadow planned to cut down across the slope to Stony Run, where it flowed under a small highway bridge. The Shadow was confident that he would arrive there well ahead of Lenstrom's car.

There was more trouble just around the corner.

Farmers with flashlights were moving along a fringe of trees that fronted Future Haven. They were turning toward the house to find out what was happening there. They spotted The Shadow against that pink-walled background. Shot-guns spoke a message that dented the vaunted plastic. The Shadow didn't stay long enough to be included. He was around another corner, crossing the lawn to merge with the trees that fringed Stony Run.

It meant a wider detour, this cross-cut to Bigby's lawn instead of Brett's. It unfortunately took The Shadow right into the path along which reserve farmers were coming. Those around Brett's had guessed his direction and a horde of them were in pursuit. Reaching the creek, The Shadow picked out stepping-stones that led to the sandy isle that had packed against Pow-wow Boulder. Hardly had he reached the middle of the stream before farmers appeared on both banks with the customary flashlights and shot-guns. In the style that made him famous, The Shadow blended with blackness. This time, he vanished into the shade of the big boulder to his right. The Pow-wow monument was a dozen feet high and proportionately wide, but it had a forward lean that was perfectly suited to The Shadow's manoeuvre. His scramble took him up the rock to its overhanging brow. Twenty feet below, the converging waters gushed into a natural basin. A slight twist in the creek brought one bank toward the pointed angle to the rock, over on Bigby's side. Without an instant's hesitation, The Shadow turned his rush into a tremendous leap.

Already shot-guns were peppering the top slope of the boulder on the chance that the ghostly fugitive might be there. The huge stone trembled with The Shadow's take-off. It seemed to quiver further under the bash of slugs. Ahead of the wild fire, The Shadow landed at the end of his tremendous leap and kept right on his course across Bigby's lawn.

Headlights twinkled around the curve in the highway from the right. They represented Lenstrom's car, nearing the bridge that crossed Stony Run. The Shadow had lost too much time to double back and meet the car there; his logical contact point was the lower end of the driveway leading down from Bigby's house.

Shouts and shots were still sounding from the distant background. The Shadow raced toward his goal, now with a double purpose. It wasn't just a case of looking to Lenstrom's safety. The Shadow was

seeking an opportunity to complete his fabulous disappearance by riding away on the car that everyone else had forgotten.

Again, however, luck was against him.

During his dash, The Shadow noted other lights, speeding down Bigby's driveway. The car that was coming from that direction was traveling much faster than it should have, from The Shadow's recollection of that winding route. There was something ominous in the way that it was out-racing The Shadow, but there wasn't a thing that he could do about it.

That car was going to meet Lenstrom's ahead of The Shadow, because of a new factor; namely, Lenstrom himself.

Unquestionably Lenstrom had heard the shots from the slope and was worried by them. He, too, was speeding his car, covering the stretch of highway much faster than The Shadow had anticipated. If he saw those lights from Bigby's driveway he might slacken, but apparently Lenstrom didn't see them. His car fairly lurched toward the final bend that would swing him into Lamira.

The man in the other car saw Lenstrom and behaved accordingly. The Shadow knew this meeting wasn't a mere coincidence when he saw the way it happened. With a sudden spurt, the car from the driveway shot out into the highway. It twisted left at a well-timed moment. Lenstrom hadn't a chance to avoid the crash that followed, nor to alleviate it.

Defly, the driver of the mystery car clipped Lenstrom's vehicle. The crash sent it off the road, bumping over an embankment to the right. By the time The Shadow reached the highway, Lenstrom's car had turned over twice. The machine that had delivered the crash was nosed half across the brink. Instead of stopping beside the car, The Shadow crossed the road. He dropped from the embankment and ploughed through a stone-obstructed thicket to reach Lenstrom. Coming finally beside the wrecked car, he saw immediate traces of a sequel to the crash.

The door of the toppled car was open. Lenstrom was lying half out of it, as though he had made a final effort to climb from the wreckage. The moonlight showed the pudgy man sprawled in a twisted fashion. His face was turned upward and his coat pulled inside out. The pocket where he had stuffed the money was empty.

It had all happened very swiftly. The half minute that The Shadow had spent in taking the difficult short-cut had been enough for the driver of the other car to leap down and finish his ugly deed. Lenstrom had helped his enemy by trying to climb out. When The Shadow clutched Lenstrom's shoulders and tried to lift him, something slipped from beside the inert figure. It clattered down into the front seat of the car.

The thing was a heavy monkey-wrench. On Lenstrom's head was the mark of a heavy blow, the coup de grace that the killer had delivered. A swipe from the wrench, a snatch at Lenstrom's open pocket, and a double deed of murder and robbery had been completed almost in a single action.

Shouts were coming from the slope above the highway. They seemed very distant, like sounds from a far-off world. Silent in the darkness, The Shadow was listening for closer sounds. His attention was focused toward the brush up toward the embankment. There, the moonlight showed a jagged path that had been hewn by Lenstrom's rolling car.

It was marshy there. The clatter of the crickets formed a chorus to the dismal kerplunks of deep-throated frogs. But those were simply a background of curtained sound against which any disturbing elements could easily be noted.

All The Shadow wanted was a token from the brush above, by which he could locate a murderer who could not be far away. This time The Shadow was close upon the heels of death. He was prepared to prove that the appearance of an accident was but the visible surface of a deep-laid scheme.

VIII.

IT was tense, that wait in the darkness; every second lingered. The only way of judging time was from the shouts of the men along the road. They were constantly coming closer, yet their approach seemed painfully slow.

Such was the effect the situation produced, but The Shadow was accustomed to this sort of vigil. His policy was to let the other man worry and thereby betray himself. The longer the wait, the tougher it usually became to an adversary's nerves.

A keen calculator of both time and distance, The Shadow was confident that the murderer could not have reached the scrubby brink where the nose of his stalled car jutted from the highway. The lights of that car were off, another testimony to the murderer's foresight, but if he hoped to make a getaway in that crippled car he was playing too long a chance.

Something else was in the lurker's mind. In those brief seconds, The Shadow sensed the game. But before the cloaked watcher could move to prevent it, the trick was staged, with a surprise result.

There was a scramble, high in the brush. Locating it, The Shadow fired quick, probing shots. If The Shadow had gained the benefit of even a slight angle, his bullets would have clipped the figure. But a heavy mass reared itself among the bushes, overshadowing them both. The Shadow's foe made a darting crawl beyond the hoisting object. The thing was coming in a straight line, squarely into the path of fire.

The thing was a man-sized stone that the murderer had located just below the road edge. He was sending it on a plunge that duplicated the rolling tumble taken by Lenstrom's wrecked car.

A freak of luck in a killer's favor!

Lenstrom's slayer didn't know that The Shadow had reached the overturned car below. Only briefly had the cloaked investigator blotted the glow from the car's dash-light. This business with the stone was for another purpose. That was to attract the attention of the arriving farmers and hurry them down into the gully. That would leave the road clear for escape.

The farmers would have fallen for it, without The Shadow's shots.

Halting when they heard the gun-bursts, they remained stock-still until the crash came. That crash was the impact of the bounding stone against the battered car below. The murderer had aimed the missile hard and well. He had planned the crushing of Lenstrom's body along with the clatter. As he dived for the road, the killer must have been hoping for a double hit: a living figure with a dead one. He knew from the shots that somebody had reached the car.

Looming larger with each jounce, the stone was obstructing The Shadow's aim all along its path. As he shifted, the thing took freakish bounds that tallied with his change of angles. The broken brush veered it back to its course. Only when the stone was hopping squarely at him, did The Shadow heed his own security.

Lunging Lenstrom's body clear of the car, The Shadow made a low, head-on rush at the crushing stone. He flattened with a sideward roll, just as it gave a last hulking heave. The rolling stone skimmed across him, brushing his shoulder with the moss that it had gathered through its stationary years. Its leap was

stopped by the larger bulk of Lenstrom's car.

The farmers didn't stop to reason what the unseen stone was, nor where it came from. Using the crash as a direction finder, they blasted the brush with shot-gun fire. They clambered down the slope at angles. By then, The Shadow was scaling straight to the road, retracing the broken path of car and boulder. When he reached the top, he heard the shot-guns blazing down below. The farmers were hoping to silence an unseen gunner before investigating the boulder's crash.

The murderer was gone, but there was only one path he could have taken. That was the gravel driveway up toward Bigby's antiquated mansion.

The highway itself was clear in the moonlight. The fringes of Bigby's lawn were soggy and would have left too many foot-tracks. The gravel was the only course for speed without traces, so The Shadow made for it. He was still endeavoring to overtake the fugitive who had stirred up a hornet's nest with his storm of buzzing bullets.

More of those stingers sang from The Shadow's automatics by the time he was half-way up the drive. The moon-flecked gravel showed him a huddled fugitive, darting well ahead. The figure was losing ground despite the urge that The Shadow's gunfire gave him. Even on the rush The Shadow could normally clip a running target with a well-aimed .45. But the irregular ground provided chance embankments under which the fugitive stooped as he went by.

Not until he neared The Gables did the murderer reach open moonlight. There he veered successfully to the shelter of some trees. Beyond them lay a rocky terrace that proved an even better barricade. The Shadow's shots were deflected by trees and rocks. He made a sharp cut across the lawn to the left. The plan was to cut off the fugitive when he came around Bigby's house, which was the next and final bulwark.

That was final, unless the man fled indoors. That was a logical place for him to go. Just as Brett was a likely suspect in the murder of Zeke, so was Bigby a proper man to class as Lenstrom's killer. All this of course was based upon the proviso that either of these worthy citizens would stoop to the crime for which the other would be prompt to blame him.

Being both neutral and independent, The Shadow was simply following his own task through. That was why he sped around Bigby's house on the side toward Brett's. he intended to invade The Gables if he found the killer gone. Passing a recess in the house wall, The Shadow saw the back door. Before he could reach it, however, the door flung open.

Out came the male members of the rural younger set. They were armed with everything from fire-tongs to frying pans. The Shadow's last shots had stabbed louder than the music of the orchestra. The crowd was coming out to learn the cause. With them was Claude Bigby. He was gesturing in the general direction of Stony Run, as though set in the notion that any trouble must have come across the creek.

That happened to be The Shadow's direction, so he whipped back into sheltering darkness. In choosing the deepest section of the recessed wall, he chose the world's worst spot. A moment later, The Shadow was greeted with a flood of light. It came from the little side door that Margo had noted earlier. Some of the local huskies had found this short-cut.

They found The Shadow with it. They paused just long enough to identify him as a human figure. They quickly changed that opinion. There was a whirl of blackness among three of the lunging forms. Out of that swirl flew a poker, a candlestick, and a heavy cane. All were followed by the reeling men who had tried to wield them. The open door momentarily revealed a spinning blur. It was spotted by the crowd with Bigby. It suddenly became a black streak that sped across the moonlit lawn. It sped toward the

Pow-wow Boulder in the middle of Stony Run.

This time The Shadow didn't stop at the Indian monument. He cleared the stepping-stones and zigzagged toward Future Haven. He was hoping to dodge the few remaining farmers who were on sentinel duty around the polychrome mansion. All The Shadow needed was a reasonable break. He gained one just as he was blending with some bushes.

A balcony door clattered open from the near side of the dream mansion. Out to the railed space two and a half floors above the ground, stepped Preston Brett. He gazed with folded arms upon the silvery lawn. He awaited the human hounds from The Gables.

Motionless, The Shadow let them pass, Bigby with them. They pulled up below the balcony and stared at the man who stood there. Shaking his fist upward, Bigby stormed:

"This is your work, Brett!"

"What work?" inquired Brett, coolly. "Staying home and minding my own business?"

"I mean that shooting over by The Gables!"

"The shooting was around here," retorted Brett. "It started right after one of my guests left. When I recognized the sound of shot-guns, I came up here."

"Kind of scared you, huh?"

"Yes," acknowledged Brett. "I felt that if your friends were in a shooting mood, they'd want me as a target."

Faces began to appear at the windows of Brett's odd-shaped living room. They belonged to guests who had crawled under the futuristic chairs and tables. By then, another guest was on his way to rejoin them. Moving around the house, The Shadow found a grip on the wall and returned to the low balcony that had been his original exit.

Brett must have excused himself, for he had come down to the living room by the time The Shadow looked in through the doorway. Back in his guise of Cranston, The Shadow strolled into the room. He stood by with the other guests while Brett opened a broad window. Cranston heard him resume his argument with Bigby.

Sober-faced farmers, arriving from the highway, put an end to verbal hostilities. They reported finding Lenstrom's car "hove off the road" with its owner dead beside it. Reluctantly, they admitted that it had been cracked by a car that came from Bigby's drive. They had heard gunshots that must have been fired by the missing driver of the death-dealing car.

"It does look like your work, Bigby," declared Brett, coolly. Then, his tone becoming anxious, he queried: "What about Lenstrom's money? Was it in his pocket?"

The farmers looked at each other, puzzled. Finally one remembered seeing the victim's empty pocket, inside out.

"So it was robbery!" accused Brett, staring straight at Bigby. "I should have known that would be your motive!"

"My motive!" returned Bigby. "Why, I've got a dozen witnesses who will swear I didn't leave The Gables!"

"But the car came from your driveway--"

"And there were a couple of dozen cars up there. Anybody might have been driving it!"

"Anybody except myself," reminded Brett, coolly, "and that goes for my guests, including Lenstrom, who happened to be driving the wrong car. But what about your guests, Bigby?"

"I'll check on all of them," promised Bigby, in a gruff but defensive tone. "I'll see to it that justice is done."

"You should have seen that crime wasn't done," returned Brett, tartly. "The burden of Lenstrom's death is on you, Bigby. You claim you own this county; very well, find the man who owns that car and make him tell his story."

Bigby and his tribe were turning back in the direction of The Gables. Closing the big window, Brett faced his guests and reflected their solemn gaze. Grim with thoughts of tragedy, these men were also awed by the mystery of the murder car that had deliberately hurled Ralph Lenstrom to his doom.

One man alone could have named the owner of that car. He had remembered the vehicle that was standing on the road. A passing glance in the moonlight had reminded The Shadow of a car that he had seen in the fog.

Lamont Cranston could have stated that the murder car belonged to Herbert Creswold.

IX.

ANOTHER inquest was over. A verdict of accidental death was reluctantly delivered. There was more to the case of Ralph Lenstrom than met the eye; of that the local coroner was certain. But the question of the missing money, the mysterious shots, and the wild chase of an imaginary phantom, all could be classed as things apart from the actual accident to Lenstrom's car.

The inquest at least proved one thing: If Herbert Creswold did not rate as the most important man in Kawagha County, he could certainly boast that he was the smartest--had he chosen to risk that title by turning braggart.

Nobody could have played a craftier hand than Creswold when questioned on the matter of his car.

The car had been undergoing repairs in a local garage. This, he said, was due to slight damage incurred at the time when Creswold had driven back from the fire at the Old Bridge Tavern. Creswold had left orders that the car should be delivered to him as soon as the repairs were completed.

Now it happened that someone had phoned the garage to leave word that Creswold would be at Bigby's party. So a garage mechanic had driven up to The Gables. Finding the open house, he had joined the party, intending to look for Creswold later. But Creswold hadn't been at the party; therefore he could only have picked up his car by waiting outside for its delivery. However, anyone else could have done just that. The key had been left in the ignition, as was customary in these parts.

According to Creswold, he'd been in his office at the Star Theater. He had been awaiting a phone call from Lenstrom after the latter returned to the hotel. Creswold operated the theater and had a private way in and out. He usually left orders not to be disturbed. In fact, the personnel of the theater seldom knew when he was there, unless he announced it.

So there was nobody to support Creswold's alibi. Equally important was the fact that no one could disprove it. This gave Creswold the benefit of the doubt, which was all he needed. The doubt involved the biggest thing in Kawagha County, the current feud between Bigby and Brett.

Each of those gentlemen was vociferous in his denunciation of the other, but neither could present a sensible argument. Brett said that Bigby wanted cash to lend the farmers. That, he contended, was sufficient reason for Bigby to personally knock Lenstrom off the road and take his money. Bigby stifled that charge with proof that he hadn't left The Gables. In return, Bigby charged Brett with having somehow tried to frame him. That didn't hold, however, considering that the burden had been tossed on Creswold.

By the time the argument had circled back to him, Creswold looked very innocent and much maligned. He said that he and Lenstrom had been the best of friends. The clerk at the Kawagha Hotel vouchsafed the fact. That swung the hearing back to Brett's original statement: that Lenstrom had left his house carrying the cash which Bigby could have used but wasn't going to get.

Now, if Lenstrom had intended to call on his old friend Creswold, why should the latter have waylaid him? If Lenstrom still carried the cash, Creswold could have acquired it more easily than resorting to murder on the highway. If Lenstrom had left the money with Brett, Creswold would have had no reason to attack him at all. Even with murder in his heart, Creswold's ignorance of Lenstrom's cash status would have caused him to wait.

This wasn't openly broached; it was simply intimated. The very inference being an injustice to Creswold, public sympathy swung heavily in his direction. The final touch was provided when witnesses stressed the existence of a "person unknown." They spoke of the cloaked marauder who had wheeled all over the map, zigzagging from Brett's to Pow-wow Boulder, down to the scene of the accident, up to Bigby's, and back across to Brett's.

Thus did The Shadow become scapegoat for the events surrounding Lenstrom's death. His operations simply added to the mystery. No one could actually say that this weird figure, more ghost than human, had played a hand in murder. Who he was, what he was, would have to be determined before making a direct accusation.

It was the coroner's business to deal in tangible facts. Somebody had certainly driven Creswold's car down the hill and smashed Lenstrom's. The culprit had undoubtedly fled after his probably accidental deed. Finding him was like finding Lenstrom's cash. Yet, to mark Creswold as the wanted man seemed preposterous.

Having just spent good money repairing his car, Creswold wouldn't go and crack it up--or would he?

By the prevailing standards of Kawagha County, Creswold wouldn't, unless he happened to be a fool, which he wasn't. So the coroner's verdict excluded Creswold, at least until some actual evidence should be found against him.

Strangers to Kawagha County were permitted to hold their own opinions. Hence, when Cranston and Margo discussed the case, they produced some curious angles. Their talk took place in the quiet lobby of the hotel.

"Creswold not only knows this territory," remarked Cranston. "he also knows the inhabitants and their reactions."

"He showed that at the inquest," agreed Margo. "He looked as though he could have answered all the questions that weren't put."

"If he'd wanted to murder Lenstrom," decided Cranston, "he couldn't have chosen a better way to do it. Ordering his own car up to Bigby's, wrecking Lenstrom's automobile with it, starting a trail back to The Gables and reversing back to the theater--"

"You forgot how he actually murdered Lenstrom," interrupted Margo. "Careless of you, Lamont."

"Hardly," said Cranston, with a smile, "since we haven't proven anything on Creswold. Let's see if we can link him with the past; I mean prior to Lenstrom's death."

Strolling over to the desk, Cranston began to chat with the clerk who had testified in Creswold's behalf. Like everyone else at the inquest, with the exception of Creswold, the hotel clerk's questioning had been cut much shorter than he wanted. So he was glad to embellish his recent testimony.

"I'll say Creswold was good friends with Lenstrom," insisted the clerk. "Why, they were talking business all the time. Not just here in the lobby, but up in Lenstrom's room."

"Were they up there yesterday?" inquired Cranston.

"Not yesterday," replied the clerk, "but they were there the day of the big storm. That was when the call came in for Creswold."

"A call from whom?"

"The party didn't give his name, but it must have been urgent because that's why Creswold left."

"You mean when he went up to the Old Bridge Tavern?"

"That's right. Lenstrom asked later where Creswold had gone, but I didn't know at the time, because Creswold hadn't gotten back."

Margo had come over to the desk. Noting that she was about to exclaim something, Cranston gently motioned her away. Nodding to the clerk, he followed. He undertoned to Margo:

"I haven't forgotten the first inquest. Old Clem testified that Zeke had phoned someone from the tavern."

"But that's the link!" Margo spoke breathlessly to keep her voice down. "He must have been calling Creswold!"

"Very probably."

"And that's why Creswold went to the tavern--"

"You mean why he was going to the tavern."

"He could have gone there," argued Margo. They were well away from the desk and she no longer needed to guard her tone. "What's more, Lenstrom must have heard that call come through, because Creswold was in his room. Don't you see how that fits, Lamont?"

"How does it fit, Margo?"

From the quiet tone of Cranston's question, Margo felt that he was baiting her with his complacency. Nevertheless, she expressed what she felt sure must be in his mind.

"It gave Creswold a motive for murdering Lenstrom," defined Margo, "because Lenstrom was the one man who could connect Creswold with Zeke's death and the tavern fire."

"What about the hotel clerk?"

"I guess Creswold overlooked him. Or maybe he hasn't. In that case, there'll be another murder--"

This time Margo interrupted herself as Cranston gave one of his slight but rare smiles.

"You're piling up the circumstantial evidence," reminded Cranston. "People always can, when they start with a false premise. We need a sounder basis to prove Creswold guilty."

"Then you really think he's guilty?"

"I said we need a sounder basis," replied Cranston, cryptically. "Until tomorrow, our policy will be to watch Creswold and learn more about his actions."

"Why only until tomorrow?"

"Because I have summoned some other observers to assist us. They will be here tomorrow. I may assign them to check on Creswold. After all, the feud between Bigby and Brett is the basis of all the local trouble. It must not be forgotten."

It didn't quite make sense to Margo. She thought that she and Lamont had fully covered the feud question. Granting that Brett had wanted the Old Bridge Tavern burned in order to financially embarrass the local farmers, he couldn't have murdered Zeke, because his alibi was solid. Similarly, Bigby's need of money could not mark him as Lenstrom's killer, because he hadn't even left The Gables until after the murder on the highway. Margo personally could testify to that important fact.

So Margo dropped the subject, satisfied at least with the thought that Cranston intended to watch Creswold. Perhaps his urge for mystery was causing him to create some where it didn't exist.

Often, Margo felt that this was the one weakness of the man whose other self, The Shadow, was Mystery personified.

X.

DINNER that evening was an ordeal for Margo Lane. She would as soon have shared a table with a batch of rattlesnakes as meet the guest who foisted himself, uninvited, upon her and Lamont Cranston. The man who Margo didn't want to come to dinner was none other than Herbert Creswold.

Still, it couldn't well be avoided. The hotel dining room was more or less a public place. When a gentleman affably sat down with two acquaintances before they had a chance to say they didn't want him, there wasn't much to do about it. Even worse, Margo felt that Cranston was very glad to have Creswold dine with them. It certainly made it easier to watch Creswold. Cranston was a stickler for efficiency.

It happened though that Lamont was master of the poker-face. Margo wasn't. She found it very difficult being nice to Creswold. His shrewd eye made her restless. At proper distance, Creswold looked benign with his easy, frequent smile. But at close range, you could see that expression tighten and practically merge with his sharp, suspicious gaze.

Fortunately Creswold confined his probe chiefly to Cranston. It must have satisfied him, for with dinner over, the grizzled man came bluntly to his subject.

"I was sorry about Lenstrom," declared Creswold. "Sorry for everybody's sake, particularly his own. Lenstrom had a real business opportunity here in Lamira."

"So Brett was telling him," remarked Cranston. "He wanted Lenstrom to lend money to the farmers."

That smile of Creswold's curled a bit sardonically.

"Brett would have," declared Creswold. "He wanted to win them away from Bigby. What did Brett say after Lenstrom left?"

Those sharp eyes were on Cranston's calm face, as though watching for a flicker of betrayal. None came. If Creswold thought of Cranston in terms of a mysterious cloaked prowler, he was getting no encouragement.

"We forgot Lenstrom," stated Cranston. "Brett was in his study. Later, he ran upstairs while the rest of us were under tables in the living room. The shot-guns began blasting right after Lenstrom left."

Creswold nodded as though he had forgotten the testimony of Brett's friends. Then:

"I said that Lenstrom had an opportunity in Lamira," repeated Creswold. "I did not refer to the county at large. I wanted Lenstrom to invest in projects like my theater and some of the local stores. The proposition is still open."

That it was open for Cranston was obvious from Creswold's fixed stare. More than before, Margo felt that the rattlesnake analogy fitted Creswold. He'd made this offer to Lenstrom before death struck. Now he was doing the same to Cranston. That seemed like a first-class rattle, though Cranston didn't take it that way.

"What about Brett's plan?" inquired Cranston, coolly. "It struck me that dealing with the farmers on a cash basis was a very sound idea."

Creswold turned his sharp eyes upon Margo and inquired:

"What do you think, Miss Lane?"

"What do I think?" Margo felt confused. "Why--why, about what?"

"About how far Brett would get with the farmers," replied Creswold, with his tight smile. "You were at Bigby's house and you saw him all evening, didn't you?"

Margo nodded emphatically. Creswold showed a definite annoyance, both in smile and gaze. Then, as though his question had been a mere preliminary and not an attempt to discredit another man's alibi, Creswold added the query:

"Weren't the farmers friendly toward Bigby?"

"Very definitely," answered Margo, "and unanimously."

Turning back to Cranston, Creswold spread his hands as though that settled it.

"Don't you see how foolish Brett was?" inquired Creswold. "He can't buy up those farms and quarries, personally or by proxy. They'll only accept money from a friend."

"If you mean Bigby," put Cranston, "where would he get the money?"

It was a direct invitation for Creswold to charge Bigby with the theft of Lenstrom's fund. As Cranston expected, Creswold side-stepped it cleanly.

"I don't mean Bigby," declared Creswold, smoothly. "I mean myself."

Cranston's eyebrows lifted.

"You mean the farmers regard you as a friend?"

"I'm everybody's friend," announced Creswold. "What's more, I have money. But if I use it to help the farmers, I'll be short on my own projects. That's why I need a partner."

There wasn't a change in Cranston's expression. It was impossible to tell whether he was thinking yes or no. Flustered for the first time, Creswold reached into his pocket. He brought out a little book and thumbed through its pages.

"I've already made some contacts, declared Creswold, "beginning with the farmers who will be assessed the heaviest on the recent fire losses. They'll be trying to raise money in that order. If I helped them"--pocketing the little book, Creswold drew out a fat envelope and toyed with it--"would it convince you, Mr. Cranston?"

"It would."

There was something so positive in Cranston's tone that Margo realized it carried reservation. It meant that he would be convinced, but he didn't specify of what. Moreover, from Cranston's gaze, Margo felt that he was sharing her question as to the contents of Creswold's envelope. It could have easily been stuffed with wads of paper instead of money.

Or if the envelope did contain cash--and this thought was more potent--it was odd that Creswold should have so much, immediately after the disappearance of Lenstrom's funds. Somehow Creswold's keen stare was requesting a challenge on that very score. His nerve could match his shrewdness. But Cranston remained unruffled. His own gaze simply indicated that his statement stood. Whereupon Creswold pocketed the envelope, rose from the table and shook hands cordially.

"I'll see you tomorrow," promised Creswold. "By then, we can talk of what I have done; not of what I intend to do."

Hardly had Creswold left the dining room before Cranston gave a quick signal to Margo. Together, they went into the lobby. Cranston gestured for Margo to watch the door while he approached the desk. A few minutes talk with the clerk was all that Cranston required; then he was whisking Margo out to the parking lot where they kept their car.

"I'm still interested in Creswold's intentions," stated Cranston as he pulled from the lot. "I think I gathered them from the hotel clerk."

"You mean Creswold told him where he was going?" asked Margo, incredulously. "Why would he do that?"

"He didn't," replied Cranston. "But the clerk knows who owns the biggest farm in the county and is therefore the hardest hit on the assessment question. Our man is Martin Tramrick, of Fairfield Farm."

Margo nodded at the latter name. She'd heard of Fairfield Farm. It stood on a road several miles beyond the hill that housed the respective mansions of Claude Bigby and Preston Brett.

"Tramrick is already counting on his friends," continued Cranston as they reached the bridge that crossed the Kawagha. "That means the other farmers--and Bigby."

Something in Cranston's delayed tone caused Margo to stare up the slope. They were swinging past Bigby's driveway and along the road that curved around the hill. Margo gained only brief, vague views of The Gables. The ancient homestead was almost entirely dark.

"Bigby is probably out raising funds," remarked Cranston, "unless promises happen to be all that he can get. Take a look at Future Haven and tell me how it looks."

"It looks like Coney Island," returned Margo. A glittering array of lights came into sight upon the slope. "If Brett isn't home, he's certainly giving the impression that he is."

They wheeled around the hill and covered the long stretch past Brett's driveway. It was Cranston who made the next observation. He pointed off through the windshield. In the cloud-flecked moonlight, Margo saw a distant batch of farm-buildings on the fringe of a wooded crest.

"Fairfield Farm," identified Cranston, "and Tramrick can expect one visitor, at least."

The car unleashed itself as Cranston spoke. It wasn't because he was referring to himself as the caller who was due at Fairfield Farm. There was another reason why Cranston wanted to clip the remaining miles to that distant goal. On a road that crossed an intervening brow, two tiny headlights were climbing toward Fairfield Farm. They were moving so rapidly that all Cranston's speed would not be enough to overtake them.

Margo Lane could picture only one man as the driver of that fast moving car. That man was everybody's friend, Herbert Creswold.

XI.

THE road forked a quarter mile before reaching Fairfield Farm. It was at that point that Cranston began operations. The car ahead had swung to the left and its taillights were suddenly blending into one. That puzzled Margo until she realized that the car must be turning into the ample yard of Fairfield Farm.

By then, Cranston had taken the fork to the right. Again, understanding dawned on Margo.

Most conspicuous of the farm buildings was a huge barn. It was about midway between the two arms of the divided road. Since the other car would probably pull up to the barn and stop there, Cranston had decided to approach from another direction.

It was a neat trick. By spurting along the road to the right, Cranston was practically under cover. Within a minute, he would be in back of the barn, provided that he could drive in from that quarter. Unfortunately there wasn't any opening in the stone wall that fringed this road, but apparently Cranston had made allowance for the fact.

Stopping abruptly at the nearest point to the looming barn, Cranston pushed open the door on his side. He turned to Margo:

"Get turned around and drive back to the fork. Stay on this road with the lights turned off. I'll join you there."

Cranston was getting out as he spoke. He was taking black garments from the back of the seat behind him. By the time Margo was at the wheel, ready to obey instructions, Cranston had become a blot in the moonlight. He was transformed to a thing that seemed a cloud of smoky blackness; a fog that trickled up across the stone wall and evaporated.

It was The Shadow, not Cranston, who started a long, swift glide toward the great hulking barn. The looming building chopped off the moonlight and provided a long stretch of gloom. Through it, The Shadow traveled as invisibly as a waft of night wind. Everything was strangely silent at that moment, so silent that something spectacular seemed in the air.

Margo had coasted over the ridge so there was no sound of a motor from that direction. Nevertheless, The Shadow was listening for such a sound. But his attention was focussed ahead of him; not in back.

All lack of noise indicated that the car ahead had halted in the farmyard, near the house, on the other side of the big barn. By the time The Shadow had taken a dozen long strides, he heard the token that he expected. A faint thump, muffled by the intervening barn, indicated that someone had stepped from a car and slammed its door.

An instant later, bedlam broke.

It began with the basso barking of huge dogs. They sounded from beyond the barn, telling that they had scented a stranger they didn't like. The barks turned to a baying sound, meaning that huge hounds were on the loose. Men's voices shouted in great excitement. At that moment, The Shadow, detouring slightly to keep to sheltering darkness, gained a glimpse of the car beyond the barn.

A man was running to the car, a man who could have been anybody in that speckled moonlight. He yanked the door open and flung himself into the car all in one manoeuvre. The door went slam just as the dogs arrived to leap at the car windows. They were huge dogs, matching the size of their deep-throated howls. Amid that tumult, The Shadow heard the shriek of a self-starter, then the sudden roar of a motor.

The car lurched forward toward the barn, the only direction that it could go. The yard was large enough for it to wheel around, but it didn't reappear as it properly should have. The Shadow didn't have to guess why. He heard the reason: shot-guns.

Apparently Farmer Tramrick was entertaining a group of visiting grangers for just such an occasion as this. Hare-brained with their hair-trigger weapons, they were repeating their system of the previous night. The man in the car was doing exactly what The Shadow had under similar circumstances; he was taking the quickest way out before that shooting could become accurate as well as hasty.

The one way out was through the big barn. The Shadow recognized it as he raced in that direction. As the crash came, he made a sharp swerve to avoid what he knew would come in his direction.

It came. The car that was the target of the shot-guns came smashing through the rear exit of the barn. The door was ripped apart like tinder. It wasn't damaging to the car. The unwieldy door was flimsy, but the result that followed was as tremendous as it was unexpected.

In the wake of the car came an explosion that sounded like a huge sigh. In a single instant, flames lifted through the barn, filling the whole interior!

Spontaneous though this combustion seemed, it was too huge to be a chance conflagration. It was like the holocaust at the Old Bridge Tavern, which The Shadow had attributed to a heavy dose of thermite. In that instance, the flaming outburst had followed what seemed a chance stroke of lightning. Here, it followed the forced passage of a car through a barn. But it would be stretching the imagination beyond all reason to suppose that anything like a backfire or a static electric spark from the car could have produced this immediate pyre.

Something was flung from the car. An incendiary bomb was a plausible answer; or better, a pair of such missiles. The flames were arching from both sides of the barn, to join in a fiery curtain behind the escaping car. It was all the work of a few brief seconds. During those few ticks of the clock, the car could not have halted in its devastating drive.

Nor did it halt now. It swerved to avoid a patch of brambles. Then it whipped around the other way. From his angle, The Shadow gained a quick look through one closed window. He could see the driver

bent low across the wheel. To identify him in those fleeting glimpses was impossible. The car was carving into darkness during those moments. By the time it had wheeled around the barn to head toward the only exit from the farmyard, the whole scene was illuminated.

The great barn was becoming a mighty torch. Flames were scorching up through the long slants of the roof. The tremendous puff had ignited the haymow.

However well the perpetrator of this incendiary act had planned it, the escape of the car was the real pay-off. The visiting farmers forgot the firebug the moment they saw the barn ignite. They came dashing from all directions to rescue the livestock. The car, cutting around in front, attracted the attention only of the dogs. They looked like a pack of hellhounds, as they launched from the fiery background to chase the car out along the road.

There was one factor that could hardly have been included in the planning of this scene: The Shadow.

Maybe he was expected, but certainly no one could have guessed from what direction he would arrive. He'd let the fugitive car speed by. That didn't mean he would permit its escape. Quite to the contrary, The Shadow took a supreme measure to prevent that very thing.

Instead of taking the hard way, through the flaming barn, or the long way around it, The Shadow picked the best of short-cuts that in addition promised an immediate result. Against the side wall of the barn was a shed, with a hen-house in back of it. The latter made a direct step to the former. While the departing car was still sloughing through the farmyard, The Shadow reached the shed top with a series of quick leaps. He hooked one arm through the frame of a broken window, while he aimed an automatic with his other hand.

Against the hell-light from within the barn, The Shadow's black cloak took a crimson dye, reflected from the window, where the mountain of hay was in full blaze. Quite unperturbed, he intended to clip the fleeing car with long-range shots as soon as it came broadside on the road.

There were shouts from below and without changing aim, The Shadow looked across his shoulder to learn the cause. He saw it, in the shape of gesticulating farmers. They were calling to Claude Bigby as he came around in back of the barn. With him was an excited man who was obviously Martin Tramrick.

The farmers had seen The Shadow and were pointing to him. Before Bigby could restrain them, Tramrick howled for them to shoot down this monster. His very location marked him as the fiend responsible for the conflagration. Shot-guns came up without reluctance.

This had all the ear-marks of The Shadow's final dilemma, the event that was to end his long career.

There wasn't time to cross the shed roof and leap to the ground before those shot-guns blazed. To start shooting at the farmers with the automatic wouldn't help. Not only would The Shadow have to wheel, there were too many shot-gunners. Even though The Shadow could have chopped down innocent men in the interest of his own self-preservation, this was something he wouldn't do.

Beside The Shadow was a window already caving under the heat of the gorging fire. To go through it meant a literal dive into a sea of destroying flame.

The Shadow really needed a friend. Quickly.

It happened that The Shadow's situation was not unique. Tuned to that dramatic instant came the cry of another creature in a like predicament. That call was more anguished than any human tone. It floated up through the red-roaring billows at The Shadow's elbow.

It was the tortured whinny of a fear-tormented horse. The terrified animal was trapped in a stall just below this sector of the hayloft. Only The Shadow heard that maddened neigh, which located itself to the exact angle. It proved that something still lived and breathed amid the holocaust, which was enough for The Shadow.

Without the fraction of an effort, The Shadow was gone in the most astounding of all his disappearances.

It took no effort to lean, which was all The Shadow did. He leaned against the window. It was already buckling, and accepted him like something that belonged where it was going. No longer blocked by a few panes and The Shadow's form, a cloud of white smoke swirled out. It billowed around the spot that The Shadow left, filling the momentary vacuum in grotesque imitation of the figure that had left it.

Shot-guns ripped a simultaneous volley that astounded the men who delivered it. The thing they saw happen simply couldn't.

Solid blackness transformed itself to whiteness, like something human turning ghostly. And it was ghostly indeed. The whitened figure disseminated into vapor of its own leisurely accord. It was as though it was mocking the men who thought they could harm it with something so impotent as a round of shot-gun slugs!

Trailing from the evanescent ghost came the sound of a strange laugh, like a farewell thinning off into the open air. That was The Shadow's final touch to keep the farmers guessing. He knew the sound would misdirect them. He wanted them to stay right where they were, for a few precious moments.

Besides, that confident laugh steeled The Shadow to his ordeal. Plunging into a wallow of smoke and flame to a goal picked by sound alone, was anything but a certainty. Here The Shadow was really using effort in a long, hard lurch toward the frantic, repeated whinny. Hay tangled him in its flaming mass as he buried his head in a cloak fold and hoped that the fiery obstruction would yield.

It gave. He plunged through the hay chute that lay above the stall. Solid whiteness bulked below. Amid the deceptive smoke, The Shadow swept the cloak aside. His fall was broken by the horse. He landed upon its massive, quivering back. The Shadow flung away the burning hay that clustered him. With the same sweep of his cloak, he placed the black folds across the horse's head and eyes.

A hard swing of The Shadow's other hand landed full force on the horse's flank. His lips voiced a fierce tone into the steed's ear. Its fear blanketed along with its blinded eyes, the horse lurched forward. Its mad rush snapped the half-burned rope that held it.

Out from beneath an avalanche of falling eaves and timbers rode The Shadow. He crouched low, astride a thundering carrier whose equine fear had been transformed into a thirst for all the speed that it could give!

XII.

THE whole barn crumpled as The Shadow emerged in his wild ride. Through a yard full of huddled cattle and astonished farmers came a white horse that looked like the devil's own. Nobody could doubt it, considering the flaming background that birthed the frantic animal and the master who urged him.

Astride the white horse, The Shadow, a contrast in black, could well be mistaken for a fiend incarnate. He was riding straight at a cluster of men. They scattered as wildly as the burning hay that The Shadow was still flicking from his cloak. They didn't realize that his course was blind because the horse was hooded within those folds.

The famed legend of the "Headless Horseman" was totally eclipsed by The Shadow. He, to all appearances, was a phantom riding a headless horse. This illusion wasn't dispelled until The Shadow was practically clear of the barnyard. He whipped the cloak fold away from the horse's eyes.

With the fire well behind it, the horse behaved as a good steed should. It turned along the road and raced toward the fork. The Shadow was carried away from the occasional shot-gun blasts that were too far back to matter. Looking over his shoulder, The Shadow saw farmers dashing toward the house. They were apparently scrambling to help prevent the flames from reaching it. But there were others climbing into cars to pursue the mystery figure that had fled the burning barn.

Cars could overtake Tramrick's favorite horse, but they weren't going to catch The Shadow. As he neared the fork, he met the hounds coming back. He reined in the horse with the burnt rope end. Rearing, the horse responded to The Shadow's tug. The steed stamped the dogs by bringing its forefeet down among them. At the same time, The Shadow took a long leap to an embankment. He hurdled a stone wall and arrived beside the car where Margo was staring astonished by the things that were happening.

Next, The Shadow was at the wheel and driving back toward Lamira, at his accustomed speed. Yelps and neighs were far behind, growing more distant against the fading glow of the great barn fire. Likewise the headlights of pursuing cars were dwindling. Margo noticed this as she glanced through the back window. Meanwhile, she was telling The Shadow about a car that had whizzed past the fork.

"It was the same car," insisted Margo, "but I'm not sure that Creswold was driving it. Anyhow, he doesn't have a bigger start than he had before. You ought to overtake him before we reach Lamira."

The Shadow did even better.

By the time he was coming around the bottom of the big hill, The Shadow spotted the other car. It was making a sharp reverse swing up into Brett's driveway. Knowing the sharp curve of the hill and the roundabout course of the drive, The Shadow simply slackened speed and drew Margo over as he went out through the door on his side of the car. In parting, he shot the quick order:

"Get back to Lamira. Watch for Creswold at the Star. I'll meet you there."

Racing up the thinly wooded slope, The Shadow reached Brett's house from the back, or rather its most remote side, since there was no telling whether Future Haven had a front or back. He saw the mystery car reach the top of the drive. It made a twist beneath some trees, and parked with its lights off. By the time The Shadow reached the spot, he found the car deserted.

One thing certain: the man from the car couldn't have entered Brett's. The Shadow would certainly have spotted him in the moonlight. The only other place where he could have headed was down across the slope toward the lower end of Stony Run.

Away below, headlights were sweeping along the highway. The Shadow watched them. For once his form seemed tense, since those lights represented Margo driving back to Lamira. It was inconceivable that the man from the empty car could have reached that lower road in time to intercept Margo, but The Shadow hadn't forgotten Lenstrom's fate along that very stretch of highway.

The moonlight showed what might have been a relaxing of The Shadow's cloaked form when Margo's car safely reached the bridge across the Kawagha. She swung into Lamira. Then, as if to belie such an emotion as relief, The Shadow turned that slight gesture into a rapid whirl.

Again demonstrating the invisible speed of the night wind, he faded from the moonlight. A blaze of

headlights appeared coming up the driveway.

It was Bigby with a batch of farmers.

The honk of their horns, the frenzy of their shouts, brought Brett to one of his balconies. He stood etched against the familiar pattern of faces belonging to his business associates. Recognizing Bigby's bellow, Brett interrupted with a testy query:

"What is it now, Bigby?"

Bigby mouthed something about Fairfield Farm which didn't make sense to Brett. When he heard the word "fire" he ducked back among his friends, as though thinking the term was an order for a rip-roar of shot-guns. But it turned out that Bigby was talking about the fire in Tramrick's barn.

"It's a dead loss!" accused Bigby. "The last we saw of it, the house was going along with the barn. We can't stand another loss as big as Fairfield Farm. You've wrecked the County Mutual, that's what!"

"I've wrecked the County Mutual?!" scoffed Brett, returning to his balcony. "So that's the stupid charge you've cooked against me! You're blaming the wrong man, Bigby! The fault is really yours--for trying to support such an antiquated institution as an insurance company that needs assessments to pay off claims.

"I've been talking about that very situation with my associates"--Brett gestured to the men clustered behind him--"and they will testify to a man that we've been discussing the subject during the past hour. Why, we were all prepared to pool our funds and be good neighbors in the matter.

"But it's hopeless now, Bigby." Brett paused, gave his head a sad shake that his associates seemed to accept as final. "This Fairfield fire is one too many. I think we'll go back to our original plan and declare a bonus for the faithful workers at the mill."

Nods came from Brett's stooges, much to the annoyance of Bigby, who snarled about the whole thing being bluff. At that moment a farmer came loping over with the news that he had discovered a somewhat dented car among the trees. A quick inspection brought the opinion that it was the car that had crashed through Tramrick's barn.

"Look at that car, Brett!" stormed Bigby. "Then try to deny that you were responsible for Tramrick's fire."

"Never saw it before," voiced Brett. "Say, though!" He turned to the men behind him. "That must be the car the garage phoned about, the drive-it-yourself job. Remember?"

The stooges nodded that they remembered.

"The Lamira Garage called up," explained Brett to Bigby, "and asked if I'd picked up the car I'd ordered them to leave in the parking lot beside the Kawagha Hotel. I told them of course I hadn't, because I didn't order any car.

"Why should I want a car?" Brett gestured toward an extension that formed a garage--"when I already have three? I sent my chauffeur downtown to find out what it was all about. When I heard from him last, they were still looking for the car that I hadn't ordered, but, which someone else must have taken from the parking lot."

The explanation satisfied Brett's friends and therefore began to impress Bigby's adherents. There were at least five men with Brett and they couldn't all be liars. The farmers began to break up grumbling among themselves for having wasted time in bothering Brett while letting an actual malefactor escape from a car

that he had planted on these premises.

Pressing his advantage, Brett smoothly suggested that the farmers take the mysterious car down to the Lamira Garage and identify it. Deciding that it was a good idea, they departed, Bigby and all, with a farmer at the wheel of the offending car.

Detouring around Brett's mansion, The Shadow crossed the lawn and followed the sheltering trees to Pow-wow Boulder. He watched the cavalcade swing around the hill, bound toward Lamira. In leisurely style The Shadow repeated his process of the previous evening. He climbed to the very tip of the odd-shaped rock. Then he sprang from it, as it threatened to teeter under the leverage of his weight. On foot, The Shadow returned to Lamira. He had become Cranston by the time he reached the lighted streets.

The movie house was well packed, but Cranston knew where he would find Margo. He picked a side seat down near the front, where the angle of the screen was very bad. That seat, however, furnished a slanted view through a curtained doorway, to a passage beyond that formed an entrance to Creswold's office.

So did the seat in front. That was where Margo was on duty. In response to Cranston's whispered query, she gave a prompt report.

"Somebody sneaked in" undertoned Margo. "It was probably Creswold, because I don't know who else would use that passage from the alley."

"Suppose we go up and see," suggested Cranston, "If Creswold is there, he'll start giving us an alibi!"

Through the curtain they found the door of an office. They had to rap heavily before Creswold appeared, looking very sleepy. After blinking at his visitors, Creswold shook his head. He gestured toward an envelope lying on the desk near the couch where he had been resting.

"I decided to wait until tomorrow," explained Creswold. "Farmers hereabouts don't like visitors at night. Some of them keep dogs just to drive people away. Suppose we talk business tomorrow evening, Cranston."

Margo was silent as she and Cranston left the theater. Of one thing she was certain: that Creswold, with his shrewd eye and bland smile, was covering up plenty. That probably included murder. Just what Cranston intended to do about it was something he didn't volunteer.

Maybe Margo should have asked him while he was The Shadow!

XIII.

THERE was lots of talk abroad in Lamira.

The County Mutual was ready to go bust unless somebody saved it. That seemed quite unlikely.

Preston Brett would have helped, so he said, if Fairfield Farm hadn't gone up in smoke. House and all, he had lost up to the tune of some twenty thousand dollars.

Herbert Creswold, who called himself everybody's friend, was willing to do it man by man. He was helping farmers individually, but that wasn't enough. If the local insurance company couldn't pay its claims, all the farmers would have to cover. Creswold was too tied up in real estate propositions to raise cash for all his friends--namely everybody.

At least the town of Lamira was happy. Brett and his associates intended to pay the mill workers a huge, long-promised bonus. It was the proper gesture, for if the town-folk wanted to help the farmers, they could. But there wasn't enough accord between town and county to promise such a generous finish.

Presiding over an indignation meeting held in the Kawagha Hotel, Claude Bigby voiced some strenuous opinions.

"We'll find the man who staged the torch act!" stormed Bigby. "Why, he must have been carrying half a dozen incendiary bombs in that hired car of his, considering the way the fire spread. I can personally testify that Tramrick's barn wasn't more than a normal fire-hazard, because I inspected it.

"What we've got to do is save the County Mutual and I'll tell you how we'll do it. We'll raise every dollar in hard cash that we can find and keep putting it into safe deposit until we have enough. Maybe we'll have to borrow living money later, but we'll find time to arrange it.

"If strangers in this county can start forming corporations"--Bigby looked about in challenging style, as though expecting Brett to pop from somewhere--"so can we. That's what we'll do: incorporate our farms and timber land and quarries, so they can remain our own."

Lamont Cranston heard all that Bigby had to say, though he wasn't at the meeting. The reason was that Bigby's voice carried through the door and across the hotel lobby. There, Cranston was watching two new guests check in.

One of these guests was named Harry Vincent; another was Cliff Marsland. In addition there was a reporter in the lobby whose name was Clyde Burke. Finding that there was news in Lamira, he was considering staying over instead of returning to New York. These three happened to be agents of The Shadow. It was these men whose arrival Cranston had mentioned to Margo.

Their designated tasks would be to watch places where The Shadow couldn't. This meant that Margo's pet ambition would be gratified, said ambition being to have Herbert Creswold under constant surveillance.

Late that afternoon, Preston Brett came from the local bank. He was flanked by two armed guards. Brett was carrying a satchel with canvas sides that bulged as only bundles of currency could make it. He passed the Star Theater and entered the office of the mill. There, his associates were waiting with a distinguished guest in the person of Lamont Cranston.

Opening the bag, Brett tallied the money it contained to a total of some sixty thousand dollars. He stowed this sum in a very modern safe in a small room that opened off from his private office. The only window in that little room opened toward the Kawagha River. At that point, it flowed toward the Star Theatre, in back of some old buildings that were across an open space.

Locking the safe, Brett waved the group back into the larger room. He checked off a long list of employees, each name being marked with its respective bonus.

"The mill is working late tonight," asserted Brett, "and I purposely arranged this overtime. It's pay-day, you know, and a little extra cash along with the semi-monthly stipend is always welcome. So everyone will be thinking in the terms of a few more dollars.

"When the bonus cash is paid in addition, we'll have a real celebration. The workers think they'll be getting their bonus next week at the earliest. So I want you all to be here"--Brett smiled in anticipation of the coming scene--"and learn what real enthusiasm can be."

In his glance from the window, Brett seemed to picture the whole yard filled with cheering mill hands. The prospect brought smiles from his associates, who until now had been worrying over this heavy delivery of cash. Brett's next glance was toward Cranston and was even more explanatory.

It was plain that Brett had played for Cranston's favor. As a substitute for the lamented Mr. Lenstrom, Cranston was more than satisfactory. He seemed to like Lamira or he wouldn't have stayed in town so long. There was no way he could know that Brett had scraped the bank account clean so that his company could make its bonus splurge.

Cranston's natural reaction would be to invest in Brett's industrial expansion. The present business seemed to be getting along so nicely. Brett's little investors were feeling new confidence in the man who handled their affairs, as they watched his play for the bigger fish named Cranston.

Only they didn't think in terms of fish. To date, Brett had dealt fairly with them, even though his promises sometimes reached an excess that was akin to grandeur. Brett had worked toward making those promises good when he began his short-lived deal with Lenstrom. Now, in spite of that disappointment, he was coming through in even fancier style.

Cranston accepted Brett's invitation to dine with the corporation members and be a guest throughout the gala evening. Enthusiasm was really rife. The group repaired to the Kawagha Hotel in a highly festive mood.

Shortly before nine o'clock, Preston Brett looked anxiously at the drinks that were still being served to his associates and their wives. He turned to Lamont Cranston, who was chatting with Margo Lane at the next table. To the guest of honor, Brett undertoned:

"You might suggest getting over to the mill. I hate to spoil these festivities with business, but coming from you, Cranston, I think they would listen."

It was neat of Brett, appointing Cranston as the head of the group. Margo recognized it as a clever build toward bringing in a future investor. She also admired the complacent way in which Lamont accepted it. Leaving by the lobby route, Brett picked up a follower, though he didn't realize it.

The trailer was Cliff Marsland. He had the firm jaw and solid frame of a local mill-hand, with an air that could have classed him as a foreman. Brett was too busy to know all his hired help personally. Cliff wouldn't excite suspicion if he happened to be going in the direction of the mill. As it happened, Brett didn't even notice him.

The man that Brett did notice was Clyde Burke. He was seen talking to the doorman of the Star Theater. Having met Clyde and knowing him to be a reporter, Brett beckoned him along. Clyde couldn't well refuse, even though he saw Creswold, the man he was assigned to watch, turn and go into the theater, as though to avoid meeting Brett.

During the short walk to the mill, Brett told Clyde about the bonus proposition. He pointed out its value as a story. When they reached the office, he showed Clyde the list of employees and checked off three or four.

"Good faithful workers, these," complimented Brett. "Keep an eye on them, Burke, and get their reactions. It ought to be good human interest stuff for any story you're writing. Just stay along with the line when the workers get their pay. My associates will be over shortly to help make out the payroll. I'd better be phoning the paymaster to come up here. See you later, Burke."

Clyde went downstairs and met Cliff, who was outside. Since it was good business to humor Brett,

Clyde switched his Creswold assignment to Cliff. They parted near the entrance to the mill yard. At just that moment, Cranston and the others appeared from the direction of the hotel.

Cranston and Brett's friends arrived without the ladies, who had stayed at the hotel. They found Brett at the lower door, calling to the paymaster, who came across the yard to join them. When they reached the upstairs office, Cranston strolled to the window and took a two-way glance.

It was all he needed to analyze the shift that Clyde and Cliff had made. Over by a lighted doorway, Clyde was playing the part of an inquiring reporter. He was chatting with a foreman who was inviting him into the mill. Up the street, Cliff was strolling toward the Star Theater. It looked as though he was intending to take in the second show.

Turning about, Cranston looked for Brett. He found him closing the door of the inner office, where he had gone to get the cash from the safe. Casually, Cranston flicked a lighter to smoke a cigarette; then suddenly clipped off the flame. A sudden loop-hole had formed in The Shadow's plans, due to a time lapse which was short, but highly important if crime happened to be on the move.

In The Shadow's calculations, crime was always on the move, particularly in a tense town like Lamira. The present situation called for a quick move by The Shadow, not the person of Lamont Cranston.

To the surprise of Brett's associates, the usually deliberate Mr. Cranston took rapid strides across the office to the closed door of the inner room. They wondered what his purpose was to be. They never did learn.

Something intervened so suddenly that Cranston's only policy was to lapse back into his visible self and forget the trip-hammer action that belonged to The Shadow!

XIV.

IT happened with a smash, and halted Cranston in his tracks. The smash came hard, from the other side of the door through which Brett had gone. Something thudded forcibly and clattered with a muffled groan. An instant later, the door was whipped inward, giving Cranston barely time to drop away from it.

In the doorway crouched a masked man, with a gleaming gun. He wagged it back and forth with an upward gesture that was self-evident. It meant that hands were to be hoisted and they were, Cranston's among them.

A curious dilemma, this, for the man who usually played The Shadow in a situation of this sort!

Having stopped just short enough, Cranston did not betray the fact that he had been stepping toward that door. Everybody in the outer office knew it, but not the masked man who had suddenly taken over from the inner room. Therefore it was good policy for Cranston to play a part that matched the actions of Brett's horrified associates.

Good policy on Brett's account, for one thing.

Over by the safe lay a huddled form that didn't move. The door of the safe was open and the money satchel was gone. It hadn't really vanished, for it was under the arm of the masked man who brandished the gun in his other hand. He seemed to regard the bag as a shield, as though its tight-packed contents could stop any bullets that a challenger might deliver.

There were no challengers.

Everyone felt harassed because of Brett. Obviously the masked man had been waiting for him. That

smash against the door had been the result. The marauder struck just after Brett had opened it and was bringing the money satchel to his friends. He had slugged Brett and flung him over by the safe.

What Brett had gotten, others would receive if they meddled with this masked fiend. His unrecognizable snarl was a full expression of his ugly sentiments. Or maybe they'd take more than Brett had. A bash on the head was sufficient to stop an unsuspecting man in a darkened room; but if this masked robber felt himself too crowded, he would probably deliver bullets by way of variety.

That was what Cranston didn't want; not on his own account, but that of others.

If the gun had leveled Cranston's way, he would have rushed it. Considering a few neat tricks that he often practiced at close range, he would probably have succeeded. But he didn't want others trying such tactics, nor did he care to irk the masked man into firing any shots at the huddled form beside the safe. It was better to let him go and salvage what was left of Brett before thinking about the cash.

Besides, as Cranston, The Shadow was calmly studying the masked man's behavior for future reference.

The crouch was about right for Bigby, who took precedence as Brett's real rival. The sharp manner tallied reasonably with Creswold, the dark horse in all previous events. When the masked man made his rush out through the large office, he would certainly settle that question of identity. That was an excellent reason to wait him out.

Only the masked man didn't rush.

He gave one quick bluff with his gun. He swung a dramatic brandish that sent men ducking. Cranston was with them, for two good reasons. One was to complete his policy of playing helpless like the rest. The other was that Cranston turned his dodge into a tricky side-dive. On the spur of the instant, it promised a sure result. If the man with the gun had come charging through, Cranston would have nailed him hard. He would have struck with a low hurling tackle.

What came Cranston's way was the door. Instead of surging forward, the marauder recoiled back into the darkened inner room. He kicked the door shut as he went. Cranston twisted about with a whirl so rapid that it was over before his dodging companions saw it. Cranston grabbed the door knob and twisted it, just as a bolt clamped on the other side.

It was a stout, heavy door that would need a battering ram to crash it. Across the big office was an object that would do. Cranston sprang to get it. During the time it took him, a new fray broke out within the inner room. Apparently Brett had been playing possum.

Something jounced the door; then footsteps clattered. There was a shout from Brett; a bellow from his masked foe. A terrific crash was accompanied by the clatter of glass. Following it came a muffled, frantic cry that was certainly Brett's. Men were pawing at the outside of the door, trying somehow to open it. Behind them, Cranston's voice called: "Gangway!"

The cluster scattered as Cranston ploughed through with his improvised battering ram. It was a heavy floor lamp. He had picked it up by the standard, wrenching the cord loose from the wall. He was gripping the lamp horizontally, its solid, weighty base ahead of him.

It hit with the punch of a pile-driver! The door split all apart. Cranston went straight through, so hard that the excited witnesses thought he was going to smash the open safe. Instead, he dropped the lamp with a side twist and sprang across the standard before it could trip him. He was just in time to catch a man who came reeling from the direction of the shattered window.

The man was Brett. He sagged so heavily that he almost pulled Cranston down with him. Other hands arrived to haul Brett to his feet. He recuperated long enough to point toward the window and gasp:

"That way!"

Reaching the window, Brett's friends saw the complete evidence of the masked robber's flight. On the ground below lay a shattered chair which the marauder had flung through the window; beyond was a ladder, lying so close to the brink of the Kawagha that it seemed the fugitive must have tried to shove it into the narrow river. Further away, near the first old building on the river bank, was the money satchel, wide open and empty.

The only place where the robber could have gone was beyond those old brick buildings. That was more important than the fact that the man had flung his coat behind him. It lay at the base of the wall, where the foot of the ladder must have been. Brett was muttering something about a struggle and a ripped coat but nobody stopped to listen. Instead, Brett's friends dashed down from the office. They split up when they reached the ground. Some went around beyond the buildings while others took the short cut behind them.

The two groups converged near the entrance of an alleyway that led straight to the back door of the Star Theater. Cranston was with them. Brett was stumbling some distance behind when the group halted at sight of Creswold. The theater owner had come abruptly from the doorway. Standing with his hands on his elbows, he blocked the unruly rush.

Creswold was in shirt sleeves. He looked puzzled by the excitement, as though his premises were being invaded by a crowd of rowdies. Recognizing who the men were, their conduct surprised him further. He shook his head when they asked if he'd seen anyone come this way. Creswold must have heard about the festivities at the hotel, because when Brett's friends started talk of robbery, Creswold stared as though he thought they were drunk.

In fact, Brett looked definitely so, with his rumpled hair, mussed attire and mumbling manner. Then, he suddenly stiffened, braced himself against the alley wall and pointed off across the Kawagha. Brett's wits were back as he exclaimed:

"Look! Going up Bigby's driveway!"

They saw the car-lights that Brett indicated and those were enough. Forgetting Creswold, the pack was off. In cars of their own, they sped across the river. They made directly for The Gables and arrived there in mad style. Fully himself again, Brett was the leader of the throng. They rushed in through the back door and came upon Bigby and a few farmers seated around the kitchen table, counting stacks of money.

With a remnant of his earlier stagger, Brett reached the table. He clamped a hand upon the money and pulled a revolver from his pocket. With the weapon practically tickling Bigby's nose, Brett hoarsed the accusation:

"You're the robber that we're after, Bigby! This is my money-- mine and my friends' money!"

"It's our money!" stormed Bigby, savagely pushing the gun aside. "All the dollars that these poor farmers could scrape up to help those who have suffered from your persecution."

Brett's friends were dragging him away, pulling the gun from his reluctant hand. What Brett hadn't heeded, they could see too plainly. There were thousands of dollars upon Bigby's kitchen table, but not in the cash that Brett had brought from the bank that afternoon.

The payroll and bonus money had been crisp and new. It had been packed into tight, neat bundles. This wealth of green was tawdry and rumpled. Its very appearance bore out Bigby's claim regarding it. It was all in bills of small denomination. It represented hard-earned cash that had been brought from socks and mattresses and attic hiding places.

Brett's funds were stolen and Bigby was in the money; but it wasn't the same money. The balance had swung from town to county and, from a cash standpoint, the feud was in Bigby's favor. Yet however much Brett hated his rival, he could not dispute Bigby's argument. This was cash hard-earned by long toil, entrusted to Bigby by his farmer friends.

From the doorway, Lamont Cranston saw the glare that Brett gave Bigby, only to receive a triumphant gleam in return. Of all the trails he had ever followed, The Shadow had never encountered one with a more curious yet conclusive ending than this!

XV.

LAMONT CRANSTON gazed idly from the window of his hotel room, studying the main street of Lamira. Viewed by daylight, the scene looked serene. But Cranston could sense what seethed beneath. The feud between Brett and Bigby should have exploded the night before, but it hadn't.

Brett's arrival at Bigby's, the furious scene between them, had all ended in a sudden calm. They had parted in white-hot hatred; Brett a bad and sullen loser; Bigby gloating over a rubbed-in victory. But that hadn't solved the mystery of the robbery at the mill office.

In his own way, Lamont Cranston was analyzing that problem. He considered the Lamira question as a whole. Present were the men who had helped check on the principal actors in the local drama. The agents of The Shadow were repeating their reports.

Harry Vincent had kept tabs on Claude Bigby.

"It wasn't too easy trailing Bigby," Harry admitted frankly. "He covered a lot of ground, collecting contributions from those farmers and I couldn't let him know that I was following him. But I'm sure of one thing: Bigby wasn't coming from the town when he made that last trip up to The Gables."

Cranston turned from the window and supplied a slightly questioning gaze that called for more specifications.

"I was parked by the bridge," explained Harry. "I saw Bigby's car swing in from an old road on his own side of the Kawagha. He turned up the driveway, and I decided to wait until he reached the house before hatching an excuse to follow and drop in there. Before I could start, a flock of cars came whooping across the bridge and tore up to Bigby's. You know the rest, better than I do."

His questioning gaze turned toward Clyde Burke.

"It was my job to watch Creswold," stated the reporter, "but when Brett invited me down to the mill, I had to go along. I left Brett in his office, tipped off Cliff to check on Creswold, and then I followed Brett's suggestion to interview the mill-hands. It seemed good policy."

"Excellent policy," agreed Cranston. "By the way, you didn't hear any sounds from the inner office while you were upstairs with Brett?"

"None at all."

"I suppose the marauder hadn't arrived by that time," decided Cranston. "Otherwise he would have

tackled Brett right then."

"Or after I left," suggested Clyde. "From then on, Brett was alone upstairs, until you arrived."

"No, he came downstairs," corrected Cranston. "He was outside, summoning the paymaster when we arrived from the hotel. It couldn't have been more than five minutes later, but those minutes were important."

A patient listener to all this discussion, Margo Lane could no longer keep silent.

"I'll say they were important, those minutes!" exclaimed Margo. "That's when Creswold must have been sneaking along the bank of the dear old Kawagha, to plant his ladder up against the window of Brett's strong room. You're worrying over everything Lamont, except the obvious!"

"Suppose we hear the report on Creswold," declared Cranston. "Then we will know how obvious it is."

That suggestion brought a headshake from Cliff Marsland who was to furnish the report in question.

"Things were a jump ahead of me," admitted Cliff. "First, I had to go back to the Star Theater, after I left Clyde down by the mill. That's when Creswold would have been on the move, sneaking the other direction."

Cranston's nod told Cliff to proceed.

"There was a line at the box office," continued Cliff, "so I was slow getting into the theater. I didn't bother about checking the time, because I wanted to tab Creswold first. After I'd picked the right seat, I kept watch on the curtained doorway until Creswold suddenly peeked through it."

"Did you clock him then?"

"Not right then. I gave him about half a minute; then I sneaked past the curtain. The door to Creswold's office was closed, so I sneaked through to the alley."

"For any special reason?"

"Yes. To see if there was a light in that little window in Creswold's office. There was."

"Could you see Creswold?"

"No. The window is too high up. I was trying to find some way of climbing up to it when I heard shouts from those old buildings down toward the mill. So I ducked to the back end of the alley, around behind the theater."

Cranston nodded; then said with a slight smile:

"That's when we arrived."

"I'll say you arrived," rejoined Cliff. "Brett's friends were like a pack of hounds on the full run. How long did it take them to get started?"

"Not very long," calculated Cranston. "Our masked friend would have been doing well to get down the ladder while I was crashing the inner door. He needed a quick run to reach the old buildings before we looked from the window. Brett's friends caught the idea immediately and started their pursuit."

"Creswold certainly handled them smoothly," conceded Cliff. "He acted as if he'd heard them shouting

when they reached the alley. He came from his office and around through the alley door, just when they arrived."

Again, Cranston nodded. He had witnessed that climax.

"He'd have had time though, to put on a coat," added Cliff. "I didn't notice his shirt sleeves when he looked out through the curtain, but I'm sure it was Creswold. There wasn't anybody else back stage or in the alley when I browsed around there. But it wasn't smart of Creswold to be in his shirt sleeves."

"Why not?" inquired Margo. "It was warm last night, wasn't it? If Creswold was working in his office, it would be natural for him to take his coat off--or would it?"

"It would," stated Cranston, speaking for Cliff as well as himself, "except that Brett ripped away the masked robber's coat during the struggle. It was found below the window."

"And was it Creswold's coat?"

"Nobody knows yet. In fact, so far no one has actually accused Creswold."

As he spoke, Cranston took another look from the hotel window. It was getting along toward dusk, but he could still see Brett coming from the direction of the mill. He was talking with some friends who were gesturing emphatically toward the Star Theater. Apparently they were convincing Brett of something.

"Brett still wants to blame Bigby," remarked Cranston, "but once he gets rid of that foolish notion, suspicion is going to swing toward Creswold. I wonder if he realizes it."

Cranston's tone was almost whimsical as his gaze fixed on the theater. Creswold was probably there at present. Brett and his friends were stopping outside the theater as Cranston's gaze went further on. He saw another man coming from the bank; namely Bigby. Immediately some farmers stepped from doorways, all with shot-guns.

"Bigby has deposited the insurance funds," stated Cranston. "The farmers must have convoyed him down here. They're getting into a huddle, too. I think their minds are going back to something--"

There was a pause in Cranston's tone as he watched the farmers gesture along the street. Bigby listened, chin in hand, and finally nodded.

"Back to that fire at Fairfield farm," continued Cranston. "They've accepted Brett's alibi at last, so they're beginning to think in terms of someone else. This means that Creswold is going to receive two sets of visitors who want to question him on separate counts. This calls for a third faction, so come along!"

With those final words, Cranston had transformed himself into The Shadow, at least in terms of action. He and his stout-hearted agents were starting from the room, to pit their small number against huge odds. Yet they could easily prove to be the balance, considering that they were entering a situation involving rival factions that could hardly get along.

Though the groups that represented Bigby and Brett were suddenly directing full attention upon Creswold, they were doing so for separate reasons and upon different counts.

More important than the centering of several charges upon one individual, was the fact that the unexploded feud between Bigby and Brett was packed with new dynamite and was ready to blow.

The Shadow knew!

XVI.

IT ALL started in the office at the Star Theater, as reliable witnesses were later to affirm. There, Herbert Creswold, turned from his desk to find himself confronted with a revolver bulging from the hand of Preston Brett.

Backed by two staunch friends, Brett was holding something in his other hand. It was a bandana handkerchief, knotted to form a mask. Brett had picked it up just within the alley door. Dangling the thing, Brett tossed it upon Creswold's desk.

"We came here to accuse you," announced Brett, "but we were willing to hear your story, Creswold. I mean your story about last night."

Creswold gave a quick, worried look at the firm, indignant faces. Then, ignoring Brett's gun, he managed to regain some of his shrewd calm.

"About last night?" he queried. "You mean about the payroll robbery at the mill?"

"What else?" demanded Brett. "We found that coat of yours. A tailor identified it as an old one he mended some months ago. But we hadn't thought of looking for the mask until we stumbled over it."

"Stumbled over it?" Creswold looked at the bandana exhibit as though he had never seen the thing. "Where?"

"Inside the alley door, where you must have chucked it out of sight. We'd have found it last night, if we'd looked. I was fool enough to blame Bigby."

As Creswold reached for the bandana and began to examine it, a hard chuckle came from the doorway. It was meant for Brett, because the man who uttered it was Claude Bigby. Gripping a shot-gun that he had borrowed from a farmer, Bigby was standing with two friends of his own.

"Glad to hear you're coming to your senses, Brett," sneered Bigby. "Only that doesn't mean you're taking Creswold. I've got a prior right."

Brett wheeled angrily.

"A prior right? On what?"

"On account of the Fairfield fire. We've found out that Creswold hired the car that showed up out there and tried to blame it on you."

"Maybe I did!" voiced Creswold, suddenly. "But people had been trying to blame me--"

Savagely, Brett interrupted by swinging his revolver toward Creswold. The weapon was brushed aside by a sweep of Bigby's shot-gun. Shoving the heavy muzzle against Creswold, Bigby turned to Brett, declaring:

"I've got the prior right--"

"To what?" demanded Brett. "Creswold murdered Lenstrom before he burned Fairfield Farm! Lenstrom was my friend! It's my job to bring in the man who killed him!"

"What about the Old Bridge Tavern?" queried Bigby, coolly. "I've just found out that Zeke was phoning Creswold, right before it happened. That gives me an even earlier priority. If you don't like it--"

To show what might happen if Brett didn't like it, Bigby brought the shot-gun full around. Creswold didn't wait another instant. With a bound, he reached the door, punched his way through the men who were standing there and started out toward the alley.

Two men were after him, so fast that they were through the door before the astonished witnesses could recover. Brett and Bigby, rivals to the limit, were each anxious to claim Creswold as a prize. Furiously they followed, slashing each other with their elbows. They reached the alley, where Creswold was ducking off behind the theater.

A revolver ripped; a shot-gun roared, but both weapons fired wide. Brett and Bigby were individually aiming after Creswold. Neither was willing that the other should score the hit. To men who were entering the alley, the running melee between Brett and Bigby looked like a completion of their own repressed feud. Both factions were represented by those witnesses; hence the result was instantaneous.

Brawny mill-hands launched after Bigby, swinging clubs that they had brought. Angry farmers hopped forward with shot-guns, intent upon downing Brett. By the time they reached the corner of the building, those two groups were tangled and clouting in ferocious style. The men who came piling from the theater were absorbed into the tangle. No one listened to their shouts concerning Creswold.

In fact, the shouters themselves forgot the man they wanted as soon as they were really in the brawl. Warding off clubs and shot-guns that came swinging at them, they began to use their fists. Meanwhile, behind the theater, Creswold was climbing into a car before either Brett or Bigby could overtake him.

They had cars handy, too. Jumping into them, they continued the chase full tilt. Creswold was whizzing toward the bridge that crossed the Kawagha. Two cars were after him, side by side. It was as though Brett and Bigby mean to continue their elbowing process on a motorized basis.

All this was witnessed by The Shadow and his agents as they hurried through the dusk. No longer was The Shadow guised as Cranston. He had cloaked himself in the dash from the hotel. What The Shadow saw close at hand was more important than the pursuit of Creswold. That chase couldn't result in the death of many, but the brawl by the theater might.

With a quick-toned order, The Shadow launched his three agents into the fray as peacemakers.

They did their part well.

With drawn guns, Harry, Cliff and Clyde slugged weapons from the hands of brawlers, without inquiring who was right or wrong. Literally, they broke the fray apart. They left in their wake clumps of bewildered men, too dazed to figure what they should be doing next. The only trouble was that more were arriving, townfolk and county residents both. They would have battered down The Shadow's agents, just to get at each other, if The Shadow hadn't personally intervened.

Fierce and mocking came a laugh that commanded all attention. Rooted in their tracks, astonished men stared beyond the theater. They saw a figure wheel into the lighted entrance of the hotel parking lot. They remembered that cloaked shape from the accounts of persons who had chased The Shadow around the neighborhood of Stony Run and Pow-wow Boulder. Whoever he was, and whatever, his presence wasn't welcome in Kawagha County.

The Shadow certified that fact by leveling his guns and jabbing shots at the men in the alley. They dodged in panic as the bullets whistled overhead and flattened against the wall of the theater. These local gentry didn't guess that those shots were purposely high, for The Shadow made them so by inches only. They figured that they were meant as actual targets. That was something calling for reprisal.

As soon as they thought The Shadow was out of bullets, the men rose en masse and went after him. They saw him whirl across the street and off into the darkness past the hotel. Shot-guns ripped wildly as did revolvers. Others hurled chance missiles in the form of loose stones.

Back trailed a laugh that seemed to merge with the upper bend of the foaming Kawagha.

Off they went, the human hell-pack. Thoughts of separate loyalty to Brett and Bigby were forgotten along with any worry over Creswold. At moments, a black blur traced itself against the white fleck of rapids. Other times it was seen amid the gray of rocks. But never was The Shadow visible when his laugh trailed back from the deepening twilight.

First from one side of the Kawagha then the other. The Shadow was leading at least fifty men upon a wild, impossible chase that had them stumbling across the broken remnants of old dams, rolling from slimy logs that clogged the river, and wading through shallows that led to holes beyond their depth.

Nobody realized the deceptive effect of that distant laugh, which might come from almost anywhere. Nor did they consider that the deepening dusk produced illusions of distance. Their occasional gunfire went far astray, any time they thought they saw the cloaked fugitive who was leading them on a Pied Piper journey.

Only The Shadow's agents understood how fully their chief was handling the situation. They knew he would be back in due time. As Cranston, he would join them in the hotel for dinner. Befuddled searchers would keep on plodding the banks of the Kawagha hunting for someone who was no longer there.

At least that should have been the climax, if word had not arrived concerning an earlier chase. The man who brought that word was Preston Brett.

Pulling his car up in front of the Kawagha Hotel, Brett climbed out. He hastened to tell eager listeners how he had fared in hunting Creswold. Brett's chunky face spread wider as he grimaced and shook his head. With an abrupt gesture he pointed off toward the hill beyond the river.

"I managed to get across the bridge first," declared Brett, in a note of brief satisfaction; then glumly, he added: "But Creswold ducked down the dirt road leading to the old ford below town. That's where I lost him."

When somebody asked what had happened to Claude Bigby, a smile relaxed Brett's stony lips.

"That part was really funny," declared Brett. "Bigby went right past the dirt road and around the hill. I could see his car lights going over the ridge past Fairfield Farm. He's probably out of the county by this time."

Stragglers were coming back from their useless hunt for The Shadow.

Brett was frankly puzzled to see them arriving from that direction. When he heard that they'd gone after a mysterious personage in black Brett was plainly annoyed.

"Creswold is the man to find," stormed Brett. "He's down the Kawagha, not up river. What's more, unless we find him, he's liable to come back--"

A clangor interrupted. It came from down the main street. Those who heard the brazen disturbance recognized what it meant.

It was the alarm bell in the Lamira State Bank!

Turning on his heel, Preston Brett dashed in that direction. The Shadow's agents followed. Again, crime was under way in this town where murder was a pastime.

Crime without The Shadow present to prevent it!

XVII.

IT was last night's crime, almost in replica. Then, Preston Brett and his fellow-investors had suffered. Now the boot was being put to Claude Bigby and his farmer friends.

In the cashier's office, a masked man, crouching behind his aimed revolver, was demanding the delivery of a strong-box. The box contained the cash just deposited in the name of the County Mutual Insurance Company.

The fact that someone had set off the alarm only hastened the process. The cashier hadn't yet put the money in the vault, so he could stall no longer. With trembling hands, he shoved the box across the table. He then ducked for shelter behind the desk, as the revolver coughed above his head.

There was a side door out from the bank building. That was the route the masked marauder took, with the strong-box under his arm. He was diving from sight just as Brett came dashing in by the front. He was followed by a throng that included The Shadow's agents.

Brandishing his own revolver, Brett shouted the name he knew too well:

"Creswold!"

Involuntarily the masked robber wheeled; then sensing his mistake, he fired a quick volley that forced his pursuers to cover. By the time they reached the side door, he was in a mud-stained car and wheeling around the bank building.

It was Creswold's car. It was showing the effect of its trip across the river ford, with a return by dirt road. This escape, however, was better planned than Creswold's frantic rush from the Star Theater, only a half an hour before. Here was masked flight accomplished with the same precision as the robbery in Brett's mill.

Only today had Creswold's car been delivered from the repair shop. It was in smooth-running order. Instead of crossing the bridge, it hit the dirt road on the near side. It headed down toward the ford that Brett had mentioned. Others were starting after it, until Brett suddenly gained an inspiration.

Turning to the men nearest at hand, Brett blurted the notion that Creswold would probably reverse his course, once he had crossed by the river ford, to the far side.

"Those dirt roads would pocket him!" expressed Brett. "If we cross the river here, we ought to be able to pick him up along the road around the hill!"

Brett was gesturing to his own car. Among those who accepted the invitation to ride with him were Cliff and Clyde. Harry had left. He was to join Margo in the car that she was bringing from the parking lot up by the hotel. Hardly had Harry opened the car door before Margo said something about having him take the wheel. It wasn't necessary.

Another figure was entering from the other side. The Shadow was back from his brief trip up the Kawagha.

Tossing aside his slouch hat, dropping his cloak collar, The Shadow became Cranston again. He took the

wheel and moved Margo over toward Harry's side. Using Brett's tail-lights as a beacon, The Shadow crossed the bridge. During the quick crossing, he listened to Harry's report of Creswold's roundabout flight and sensational return. It was Brett who had brought the news of Creswold's first trip across the shallow ford. If Brett's present guess proved right, there would still be a chance of trapping Creswold.

The guess was definitely right. As the cars hit the highway around the lower slope, a pair of headlights emerged from the obscure dirt road that Brett had mentioned. The car whipped around like a scared rabbit. It took the curve beyond the hill, with both Brett and The Shadow gaining on it. Ahead was the driveway up to Brett's. It was the way Creswold had turned the night The Shadow was chasing him from Fairfield Farm.

That recollection must have clicked with the fugitive driver. He swung his car up toward Brett's, giving a burst of speed that added a little leeway. It was a clever move. The other cars would find it difficult to gain ground coming up those curves.

Once before, Creswold had escaped pursuers by deserting his car when he reached Brett's mansion. The policy still stood good. When the other cars arrived there, they found Creswold's mud-spattered vehicle empty. Not only was the driver gone, the bulky strong-box had vanished with him. Unless he had chucked it from the car, the robber would still be carrying it, as a troublesome burden.

Brett bawled that fact in urging his comrades to spread and search the premises. They did so with immediate zeal. More cars were arriving. They were the ones that had trailed Creswold's around through the ford. They too disgorged a horde of searchers. Flashlights were flickering everywhere among the trees. Brett was unlocking his front door in order to reach the roof. There he had installed a searchlight in connection with his aerocar garage.

When the searchlight's big beam sliced through the trees, it threatened to disclose The Shadow. So far, he had had been helping in the search for Creswold without encountering any of the men along the Kawagha.

To elude the penetrating blaze, The Shadow used the stepping stones above Pow-wow Boulder. He headed directly toward Bigby's homestead, where some lights were glowing in the window. As he reached The Gables, The Shadow saw Bigby's car standing in the driveway. A few moments later, some other cars came up the slope, honking their horns. The house door opened. Bigby stepped out with his faithful shotgun to hail some arriving farmers.

"See anything of Creswold?" queried Bigby. "I lost him on the way to Fairfield Farm."

"We saw him alright," returned a farmer. "He doubled back to town, that's what!"

"I should have known it!" spat Bigby, angrily. "You know that dirt road that comes around in back of the hill? I used it getting back here and all the while I was saying to myself that Creswold could have done the same."

"That wasn't what he did, Mr. Bigby. He came over across the old ford."

"Who says so?"

"Brett said so."

"Then Brett lied worse than ever. That ford is too deep for any car to cross."

"Not since Brett finished the new dam, it ain't," reminded a farmer. "The dam cut the water supply down below. You could tell that Creswold's car had been across the ford, from the way it got muddy coming

along the dirt road.

"All right," conceded Bigby. "But why did Creswold come back?"

A chorus of voices answered that query.

"To get our money!"

"The cash you left at the bank, Mr. Bigby!"

"He staged a robbery, that's what!"

"Masked the same as the last time--as if that made any difference!"

This outburst of facts threw Bigby into one of his madder moods. He began storming at his arch-rival Brett. He was shouting as though he hoped his voice could carry clear to Future Haven, where the searchlight was still making its circuit. Finally drowning Bigby's voice, the farmers certified to Brett's innocence on this occasion. They loudly declared that Brett had been the first man to try to stop the robbery at the Lamira State.

Gradually becoming mollified, Bigby finally turned hopeless. The loss of those funds was a crush to his hopes. Seeing the farmer from whom he had borrowed the shot-gun, Bigby tossed him the weapon and turned away. With bowed shoulders, Bigby went back into his house and closed the door.

A few minutes later, the searchlight was extinguished at Future Haven. Brett, too, it seemed, had given up hope of finding Creswold.

Moving back through the darkness, The Shadow noted a dwindling of the flashlight flickers. Searchers were leaving Brett's premises as they had begun to desert Bigby's. Despite the intensive effort to surround him, Creswold must have managed to get clear of this slope.

Crossing Stony Run, The Shadow paused beside Pow-wow Boulder. All that disturbed the silence here was the tumbling tumult of the run. He found the babble somehow conducive to thought. The Indians, too, had found it helpful. It struck The Shadow as an excellent place to hold a one-man conference.

Climbing the boulder, The Shadow felt it give a slight tilt, then settle with a clack upon the stones below its sandy bed. In piling up the sand, the creek had probably compensated by wearing down some of the foundation rock. Nevertheless the giant boulder would remain a landmark for many years to come.

Thoughts of those coming years caused The Shadow to contemplate others gone by. He recalled the local legend: how time after time, the Indians had used this starting point to begin attacks on the Bigby stronghold, beyond Stony Run. In those days, there hadn't been a mansion where Brett's house now stood. Not even a sheep pasture had occupied that other section of the slope. All this land was originally forest.

Always, rescue parties had arrived from those woods to relieve the beleaguered Bigbys. No matter how secretly or cleverly the Indians planned, their surprise attacks always failed. The Bigby family was clever, too, when it came to bringing help from the nearest settlement which in those days lay further down the Kawagha Valley.

Such was local history. It was the sort that could be read on a picture postcard or a hotel menu. Even some old stone inscriptions mentioned it. The Shadow recalled such markers in Lamira. Curiously, The Shadow found himself linking the past to the present. He was uncovering a long-buried secret to solve an existing problem.

That was the problem of Herbert Creswold. The man had held the balance in the feud between Claude Bigby and Preston Brett. He had also played his own scheme well--in fact too well to suit The Shadow. In one sudden surge of thought, The Shadow had the single answer that could supply all the missing links in a singular chain of crime.

Those searchers who were leaving the slope were departing in the half-dazed belief that Herbert Creswold was an arch-genius at disappearing from the midst of a man-hunt. They were probably giving him more credit than they had conceded to a mysterious cloaked personage who had earlier outguessed them along the banks of the Kawagha River.

What The Shadow had accomplished on the Kawagha, he could duplicate on Stony Run--and more. In fact, once before he had staged a rapid vanishing act at Pow-wow Boulder. Tonight he was willing to attempt it on a far more amazing scale. If it brought the final result The Shadow anticipated, it would be worth the entire risk. Crime would vanish from this region.

Rising upon Pow-wow Boulder, The Shadow delivered a weird, sinister laugh that echoed like a ghostly challenge down the course of Stony Run. No Indian war-whoops had ever carried so curdling a message as that mad, mocking mirth. It reached a mighty crescendo and shivered into a shuddering silence.

The Shadow was calling all comers. Whether they would find him was a question still unsolved--like the crimes that remained unsettled despite the disappearance of Herbert Creswold!

XVIII.

THE moment that they heard the strident laugh, The Shadow's agents were on the alert. They could feel its chilling force as they watched the reaction on others. Guessing that their chief was trying to draw persons in his direction, the agents suddenly started in the direction of Stony Run, except for Margo, who was stationed in the car.

Other men followed the bold example, but with certain reservations. Instead of coming singly, some stayed in clusters. There were others who decided to circle up the slope and work down from the top. Those who were down by the highway began creeping up along Stony Run. All in all, it became a surrounding process.

The laugh was too unreal to be a challenge from Creswold, the man both factions sought. It gave an uneasy feeling to the members of the rival bands. They still stood for Bigby and Brett as individuals, even though the present cause was a common one. Some of the farmers found an excellent excuse for their fears. They began to sidle over to Brett's mansion. There, they could later claim they had taken up watchful duty in Bigby's interest. Similarly there were mill hands who felt it a good idea to cover Bigby's house in Brett's behalf.

These, however, were exceptions rather than the rule. Most of the men within earshot decided to approach Pow-wow Boulder and learn what was happening there.

Meanwhile, The Shadow was anything but idle. From the boulder top, he was gripping a limb of an overhanging tree. He was twisting the big branch from the trunk. When it refused to break entirely, The Shadow settled the matter with some well-placed shots from a .45. He followed the volley with a repetition of his challenging laugh.

The effect on the hearers was twofold.

As the sound of shots halted them, the laugh almost caused a stampede. The men had connected the two events. They reasoned that the author of the laugh was more human than ghostly, or he wouldn't be

indulging in gunfire. The circle began to compress more rapidly.

The Shadow was working rapidly, too.

At the risk of losing his balance, he poised on the tip of Pow-wow Boulder. As the rock leaned in its top-heavy style, he thrust the broken end of the stout branch down toward the sand to serve as a wedge. To let the branch settle itself, The Shadow twisted and leaped to the bank below. Wheeling out from among the trees, he became briefly visible in the rising moonlight.

Shots throated from shot-guns and revolvers, as the phantom figure whisked from sight. In departing, The Shadow gave an answering jab from an automatic and made a trip across the stepping stones. From the opposite bank, he applied the same process for the benefit of those who were on that side. Then swiftly, The Shadow reached the sandy patch in the middle of the tumbling stream, just above the boulder.

The huge stone hadn't quite settled. Clamping the long end of the bough, The Shadow used it as a lever to give the boulder another prod. Up went the mammoth landmark to pose with a slanted gap beneath it. Down among jagged rocks that formed a bed, The Shadow saw an irregular crevice. It was deep enough to receive a human form. With a long, sliding glide, he entered the space feet first.

Obligingly, Pow-wow Boulder seemed to restrain itself. The real reason was that The Shadow's action was timed more swiftly than the rock could begin to settle into space. He was gone, like a clump of dissolving blackness. Pow-wow Boulder rocked back to normal with a thwack that snapped the heavy bough. The short end of the improvised lever came tumbling after The Shadow. The rest was catapulted into Stony Run, which promptly carried the evidence down around the boulder.

No water entered with The Shadow. He had raised only the sand-buried portion of the boulder. When flashlights focussed on that tongue of sand, there wasn't a trace of the cloaked figure that had been there a dozen seconds earlier. Shouting to each other, clustering men began to scour the banks of the cascading stream.

Working down into the burrow beneath the boulder, The Shadow found the crevice half-obstructed. Kicking a stone loose, he heard it clatter a short way below. So The Shadow squeezed downward and followed. He landed in a cavernous pit. The Shadow gave a whispered laugh that was echoed from surrounding walls. The tone itself enabled him to estimate the space as at least twenty feet across.

With those echoes, The Shadow's flashlight blinked into a sweep. It finally focussed upon a figure that sat bound and gagged upon a wooden platform mounted on large legs. The platform itself was eight feet square. Its purpose was to protect its contents, human and otherwise, from trickling water that filtered down through the rock and formed a pool upon the floor.

Along with the human occupant, the visible objects on the platform included a metal strong-box and a wooden crate, neither of them large. Sweeping the flashlight about the place again, The Shadow noted alcoves on each side. These were to be expected. The cave was of limestone formation, a common thing in this quarry country.

Making short work of the bonds and gag, The Shadow let the prisoner stretch himself. Meanwhile The Shadow lighted a lantern that was on the platform and hung it on a hook that jutted from the wall above.

Turning to the man again, The Shadow studied the scared face of Herbert Creswold. His fear was by no means relaxed in the presence of this sinister rescuer.

In fact, Creswold's worry increased when The Shadow opened the strong box and brought out items in due order. First came an envelope containing Lenstrom's fifty thousand dollars. It was all in crisp bills of

high denominations. Next were Brett's packets of pay-roll and bonus money. It was equally crisp, but bulkier, to a total of sixty thousand. Finally, The Shadow saw the major contents of the box. As yet uncounted, it was the mass of small denomination bills in old money that Bigby had collected from the farmers.

"I didn't steal it!" gasped Creswold. "It was Bigby who brought me here--after I drove up to his house. I thought he'd listen--because he tried to protect me from Brett--down in the theater. Bigby was safer than Brett, because he hadn't accused me of stealing anything."

The Shadow gave a gesture to the mass of old money that lay packed in the strong-box. Creswold shook his head.

"I wasn't responsible," he insisted. "Bigby brought that box when he returned. Only the other funds were here first."

The Shadow looked toward the wooden crate and gave a warning gesture.

"Don't touch it!" exclaimed Creswold. "It's full of explosives and incendiary bombs. Bigby is behind all this, don't you understand?"

The Shadow's laugh toned low. His query came as a commanding whisper:

"You mean that Bigby set those fires--"

"Of course," nodded Creswold. "He was double-crossing the farmers and trying to blame it on Brett. Only somehow it didn't work as well as he wanted. So I became the fall-guy. Bigby didn't lose any money in the insurance company, except what he paid in assessments. Then he brought all that back as part of the money he stole.

"He even bragged how he drove into town in my car"--Creswold was leaning forward, earnestly--"and staged the robbery while masked, so people would blame it on me. If I'd only trusted Brett instead of Bigby!"

Moaning, Creswold buried his head in his hands, as though he doubted that even The Shadow would believe his innocence. Somehow Creswold didn't realize that the evidence surrounding him was more potent than words. If Creswold wanted corroboration for his story, he didn't have long to wait. Fortunately The Shadow recognized that point before Creswold did.

Only the keen ears of The Shadow could have detected the sound that was no louder than Creswold's moan. With a sweep, the cloaked form wheeled away from the light. The Shadow spun toward the side of the platform where a box of explosives rested. It was then that Creswold heard the footfalls. He looked up, as Bigby stepped suddenly into sight.

Seeing the prisoner loose, Bigby shoved a hand to his hip pocket. His move was halted by a low-toned laugh which brought ghoulsh shudders from the limestone walls. Dropping back, Bigby let his hands lift, half-clenched.

The mystery of Creswold's release was revealed to Claude Bigby. It was but a preliminary to some facts that this man of crime would personally be called on to reveal. The thing that was going to make Bigby talk was a leveled automatic.

A big .45 gripped in the fist of The Shadow!

THERE was more anger than fear in Bigby's voice as he beat The Shadow's actions by coming through with facts. Apparently Bigby guessed that Creswold had testified sufficiently to make his own denials useless.

"So you came down under Pow-wow Boulder," said Bigby, to his silent accuser. Hands still lifted, Bigby glanced up to the jagged crevice and shrugged. "I should have planted some cement there, because the old rock was getting loose. Still, the old legend was a danger, if anybody thought too much about it."

"I thought enough about it," affirmed The Shadow. "So proceed."

"There's a tunnel leading from the house." Bigby made a beckoning motion with his head. "That's how they used to listen in on the pow-wow in the old days."

"And then send for help," supplied The Shadow. "That was important too, wasn't it, Bigby."

There was no note of query in The Shadow's tone. Realizing that lack, Bigby's eyes became suddenly nervous, then steadied in their usually abrupt style.

"Forget the old days," gruffed Bigby. "You've got me and my fun is over. I guess Creswold has told you all about it."

"Not quite all."

"Well, you can hear the rest then. When Preston Brett moved into this county, I had to find a way to fix him." Savagely, Bigby tightened his raised hands and his voice became a snarl. "After Brett tricked me on that pasture buy, I swore I'd run him out of the Kawagha Valley if it was the last thing I ever did."

Bigby paused as though The Shadow would at least accept his sentiments regarding Brett, but there was no response from those hidden lips. They, like The Shadow's face, were concealed by the down-tilted hat brim and the upturned cloak collar.

"It wasn't easy to run Brett out," growled Bigby. "He was getting more solid all the while. I had to frame him somehow, so I stirred up the farmers by pulling the incendiary act. It was easy for me to do it--with Zeke helping at first."

"Until you murdered him," remarked The Shadow, "after he planted the job at Clem's tavern."

"Zeke was beginning to get troublesome," snarled Bigby. "Anyway, it was Creswold's fault for trying to pump Zeke about the farm fires. I wasn't trying to frame Creswold--he just put his neck out too much."

"Like at Fairfield Farm. I had the thermite already planted in the hay and wired proper. When Creswold cracked through that rear door, he set off the fireworks for me. Maybe you guessed it, being there."

The Shadow had guessed it, but he preferred to keep Bigby guessing further.

"Anyway, I didn't knock off Lenstrom," snapped Bigby, "or steal Brett's mill money. It was Creswold did those jobs. I just took the dough away from him. He'll deny it, but you'll believe me if you look at him--"

Creswold was already denying it, frantically. Bigby urged forward, shaking his raised clenched fists. Bigby's tone was becoming savage and it was natural that he should raise it in order to shout Creswold down. False or true, Bigby's accusation was something to be expected, like the manner that accompanied it. That act would have tricked anyone except The Shadow.

Instead of being fooled, The Shadow took Bigby's act for exactly what it was, an attempt to cover

something else. The Shadow did more than gesture Bigby back with the leveled automatic. He caught the broad man's arm and whirled him full around with a clamp that not only held Bigby helpless, but turned him into a living shield.

Across the human barricade, The Shadow delivered a confident, defiant laugh, He aimed his muzzle straight at the man who was arriving with a drawn revolver to take up Bigby's cause. The man who was caught flat-footed, with his weapon unaimed, was none other than his rival, Preston Brett.

They called themselves arch-enemies, these two, but they were actually arch-friends. If they thought they could play their act any further, they were wrong. The chamber throbbed with The Shadow's laugh.

That mirth carried a revealing quality that turned Brett's stare into a grimace. He let his gun clatter to the rugged limestone floor.

"I expected you sooner, Brett," informed The Shadow, in his sibilant tone, "but it was best to time you through Bigby. To whitewash Creswold half way and then accuse him of the rest made anything but sense.

"Of course it was necessary"--The Shadow spoke this into Bigby's ear--"because you had given yourself too good an alibi, Bigby--twice. Once when Lenstrom was murdered and robbed; again, when the mill money was stolen."

The Shadow's concentration on Bigby was bringing brief confidence back to Brett.

"What foolishness is this?" queried Brett, suddenly; "I was at home when Lenstrom left there and Bigby's farmers had me boxed--"

"Just to help your alibi," interposed The Shadow, "with Bigby's cooperation. This tunnel comes from your house, Brett, or you wouldn't be here right now. You used it to get over to Bigby's in a hurry and drive Creswold's car down to the highway. There, you battered Lenstrom off the road. You ran back up to Bigby's and came home by the underground."

There was a brief pause; then The Shadow spoke reminiscently to Bigby:

"That's how they brought help in the old days. By following the tunnel through to an outlet in the woods. That was later to become a sheep pasture. Still later--in fact only recently--your partner Brett built this fancy mansion right over that outlet.

"It was simple for you to hold conferences and decide what to do about persons like Lenstrom, even at the last minute. Brett would go down into his cellar for champagne. You went into yours for cider--"

It was Brett who made a sudden interruption.

"Whoever you are, you're crazy!" blurted Brett. "I suppose you'll be saying next that I robbed myself down at the mill--"

"Exactly," interposed The Shadow. "Bigby had an alibi and the time was too short for Creswold to get back to the theater. I know that from the testimony of a man who saw him look through the curtained door and return to his office; a man who still had time to go through to the alley and try to peer into Creswold's window before the chase arrived.

"That pack should have been almost on Creswold's heels as you should know, Brett. You were with it. You had to come along to plant the bandana mask behind the alley door. Odd, too, that you didn't use a gun when you fought the masked man. You pulled one on Bigby when you came up to accuse him."

Slowly, The Shadow was working Bigby forward to where Brett stood. Creswold, staring from the platform, listened in amazement to the analysis that cleared him.

"What we saw huddled near the safe," The Shadow told Brett, "was simply a torn coat, placed over a toppled chair. You had to have something that would pass for yourself while you posed as the masked robber.

"Amazing how you recuperated the moment the masked man bolted the door. Strange that he would have crashed the window with a chair instead of just opening it--except that it added noise to your pretended fight and helped fling the coat further, because the chair carried it.

"The ladder was planted beforehand, of course. Probably when you took the money out and placed it in your car--at the time you were hunting up the paymaster. As for that empty satchel--which was made of stiff material that retained the supposed bulge of cash--you simply flung it as far as you could, after you cracked the window."

The Shadow's gun was right between Brett's eyes with Bigby's shoulder serving as a rest. The partners who had conspired to rob an entire county, were too taut to make a move.

Then Bigby was moving, because The Shadow thrust him. He wouldn't have dared to shift his shoulder of his own accord.

Bigby stumbled over a rough spot in the crude limestone floor. Tripping, Bigby actually tried frantically to catch himself and thus avoid The Shadow's wrath. In doing so, he grabbed Brett, who with the same sincere fear, lunged to help his partner. Their heave was hard and sudden, with the emphasis from Brett.

Back reeled the pair, flinging The Shadow into a stumble from that same treacherous floor. As Brett saw their cloaked captor reel, he snapped quick words to Bigby. He made a wild, turning snatch for his gun. Seeing Brett go one direction, Bigby dashed the other. Each turned from a tunneled alcove to fire at the fighter in black.

The Shadow was on his feet by then. Fading as he stabbed quick shots, he brought a howl from Bigby and a stagger from Brett. Both dodged from sight, suddenly turning their fire in Creswold's general direction.

Dropping from the platform, Creswold tried to crawl beneath. He thought that the shots were meant for him, but The Shadow knew better. Bigby and Brett had crossed to opposite spots of safety in the tunnels leading to each other's house. They were trying to blast the crate of explosives that was in the large cave with The Shadow.

Death to that black-clad avenger would cover the past crimes of these secret partners. It would let them continue with the cunning game that depended on their pretence of mutual hate!

XX.

THERE was a way to balk that devastating volley before it brought results. The Shadow took that way. With a quick whirl, he took long swift strides across the path of double fire. He reached the crate before either Bigby or Brett could get the needed angle.

From the crate, The Shadow grabbed the most powerful specimen he saw, a hand grenade. It was capable of wrecking the cave. Wheeling back, he became the target for the gunfire. Both marksmen were hoping that if they clipped him, he would drop the grenade and go to the devil with it.

Wheeling at an unexpected angle, The Shadow hurled the grenade straight and well. If he'd chosen either Brett or Bigby as a target, he'd have laid himself wide open to their much improving aim. Instead, he carried himself away from their converging fire.

Where The Shadow flung the grenade was up through the crevice by which he had descended. Skimming past the edges of fringing rocks, the missile carried all the way. It burst with a mighty split of sound and fire at the very base of the boulder itself.

The explosion was too high to do more than shower the cavern with chunks of broken stone. The grenade focussed its damage upon Pow-wow Boulder. The men up by Stony Run recoiled in horror as the big landmark exploded like a meteorite. Showering sand spewed in the fashion of a geyser.

For a moment, the waters of the stream heaved backward. Then, with a happy roar, they launched their full volume into the wide, irregular gap that marked the very middle of the creek. Stony Run had changed itself into a miniature Niagara, pouring down to nowhere!

Witnessing the arrival of that churning foam, both Brett and Bigby turned to flee. They raced along the rising slants of the underground tunnels that led to their two mansions. They were shooting back as they went. Their ricocheting bullets could keep The Shadow in the midst of the deluge that he had created. There, they hoped, he would drown with Creswold.

All during their frantic--but delighted--stumble, crime's partners saw that The Shadow was still trapped. He hadn't appeared in the flood that was spreading in pursuit of the conspirators. Apparently, sure that to follow either way would be fatal, The Shadow had preferred to drown.

Brett and Bigby weren't the only persons who thought so. Creswold felt the same. What he didn't want was to be drowned also.

That was why Creswold came staggering around the descending cataract. It was widening the whole roof of the cavern. Looking upward, The Shadow grabbed Creswold. He was just in time to wrench him away from a mass of falling rock. That was small comfort, considering that The Shadow's course led to the deep wall of the cave.

The water was already waist deep. The Shadow spilled the crate of explosives into the surging tide. It was swept away and soaked, but that seemed useless to Creswold. He was no longer worrying about being blown up. Drowning was the imminent certainty that bothered him.

It would have been a certainty, but for a factor that only The Shadow considered. Bigby and Brett could be excused for forgetting it, since it was out of sight. But it was in Creswold's full view.

Actually, Creswold didn't look for it until The Shadow threw him upon it. Creswold landed hard upon the wooden platform. It was now burdened only by the box that contained the stolen money. Those partners in theft had left it behind them in their rush.

To his surprise, Creswold found the platform floating. It shouldn't have surprised him. The water was more than neck deep and the platform was made of wood. Hanging onto it, Creswold heard a whispered laugh. The Shadow came up beside him. From then on they were climbing steadily, buoyed by the improvised life-raft.

There was only one danger. It came from the horse-shoe waterfall. It was circling around the raft, coming from the brink of broken rock above. That semi-circle was widening all the while. It crumpled pieces of ledges loose. The falling chunks were dropping behind the curved cataract.

Then, Creswold realized that the forceful effect of the newly-formed cataract was itself keeping the floating platform away from the thundering falls. Not only that; the cave was filling so rapidly that the falls themselves were decreasing in size.

Tree boughs waved a welcome from the moonlight above. The raft came floating up through a great hole that had once marked the site of Pow-wow Boulder!

No men were there to join in the greeting. Even The Shadow's agents hadn't guessed the simple but surprising mode of exit that their chief would use to escape what seemed an absolute death-trap. Like others who had witnessed the singular transformation of Stony Run, The Shadow's aides had been attracted to other centers of excitement.

Shots were coming from two directions; namely from the mansions that flanked the dividing stream. Something was happening at Bigby's and Brett's.

Something was also happening to Bigby and Brett.

Time and again, Claude Bigby had come storming from The Gables to shout orders at the farmers who had long been his unwitting dupes. To-night, some of those same farmers were doing service for Bigby. They were watching Future Haven to see that Bigby's rival caused no more trouble.

Similarly, Preston Brett, as master of Future Haven, controlled his own pack of friends. They were watching The Gables to see that Bigby stayed where he belonged.

So the same situation ruled both sectors of the slope.

Only the men who came suddenly from those houses weren't the men who belonged there.

When Claude Bigby staggered, water-soaked, from the futuristic mansion, it would have been bad enough if he had faced Brett's crew. But to come from the home of the man he most hated, was something Bigby never should have done. In fact he never would have--if The Shadow hadn't started him in the wrong direction and supplied a tidal wave to spur him along the route.

There was anger in the faces of the faithful farmers. Instead of dulling it, Bigby gave himself away. Creswold's car was standing handy. In sudden panic, Bigby made for it. That was enough. It told his former friends exactly who had driven the car up here. That Bigby had entered Brett's house and gone by tunnel to his own, was evidenced by his water-soaked condition. Only Stony Run could be responsible.

With shot-guns turning his direction, Bigby made his final mistake. He swung savagely from Creswold's car to aim with his revolver. His intent was so obviously murderous that the farmers couldn't hold their triggers. Four of them beat Bigby to the shot--his revolver was empty. Bigby had wasted all his bullets trying to hold back an imaginary pursuer called The Shadow. In his present madness, he had forgot it.

Claude Bigby wilted under the heavy blast of shot-guns. Those shots were answered by the echoes of distant gunfire from the other side of Stony Run.

Those other shots spelled doom for Preston Brett.

In coming from The Gables, Brett had copied Bigby's error. He looked quite as much the water-rat. The men who met him included a few of his tricked investors, plus several bonus-starved mill workers. They had expected Bigby. They weren't pleased to see Brett, but he was smart enough to recognize it.

Waving his gun back into the old house, Brett shouted something about Bigby. That made his hearers think he'd finished his rival in an actual duel. They were starting in to find out, when another car arrived.

The temptation of a running motor was too much for Brett.

Using his gun as a threat to bring the driver out, Brett leaped to the wheel. He swung the car around. His gun was empty, too. This was proved when he aimed it at his own friends who came from Bigby's door. By the time Brett was away in the borrowed car, the others were in theirs.

Brakes were something Brett didn't think about until he neared the bottom of the drive. The car didn't stop until it bounced into the rock-studded Kawagha. It submerged itself completely. Brett was now very dead.

Margo's car was stopping warily at the spot where the highway crossed Stony Run. She felt shaky after what she'd seen at Future Haven, where Harry Vincent had remained. Clyde and Cliff had witnessed the happenings at The Gables, but they hadn't seen the finish at the bottom of the driveway. Again, that had been Margo's privilege. She was stopping to regain her breath after watching the car go bouncing over the embankment.

Stony Run was roaring again. It had filled the cavern that temporarily obstructed it. Flashlights were surrounding a man who was stranded on a raft. The fresh tide had carried him almost to the road. The lights showed Herbert Creswold explaining things to the men who were helping him from the raft. They were in a mood to listen and believe--especially when Creswold amplified his data by handing over proof in bundles of reclaimed money.

The door of her car closed softly. Margo found she was no longer at the wheel. The car was starting under the guidance of the driver who replaced her. It was a black-cloaked figure whose hat-brim dripped water like a rainspout.

Across the bridge to Lamira, the car turned upstream. It sped toward the old road by which The Shadow and Margo had first entered the Kawagha Valley. As they reached the spot where The Shadow had disappeared that afternoon, he sent back a trailing laugh that carried a strange note of departing triumph.

Weirdly that laugh lingered in the moonlight. It reverberated over an area that had been thick with thunderclouds the day The Shadow had arrived. That difference gave an added significance to The Shadow's appropriate farewell.

The Shadow had cleared the scene of crime. Bigby and Brett, those partners in greed, had failed in the cause they had hoped to prolong with equal profit.

No longer would Lamira remain a town of hate!

THE END.